Bodies in Space

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Bodies in Space

by BairnSidhe

Summary

Darcy Lewis has worked more than her share of years keeping Steve Rogers and James Barnes alive, and she's not stopping now. Good thing she has the Agents of HERO

Steve Rogers is very happy to finally be in the same time and place as his best girl and best guy. It'd be better if they weren't all three bordering on crazy. Good thing he has The Avengers.

Bucky Barnes got very very lost, and finding all the missing pieces might just take this group farther than they ever thought they would. Good thing he's not alone.

Notes

I would like to thank everyone who cheered me on through Bodies in Time. I hope we all have as good a time on this roller-coaster as we did on the last.
Please remember that this picks up immediately after Bodies in Time's last segment when Darcy connects with Bucky.

Due to an unfortunate glitch in the Notes system, the bottom notes will not be available for the first chapter, but feel free to ask about anything, and have a teaser:

“If Barton’s snicker-doodles are compromised because of anyone, I will hurt them,” Natasha said. “Even you, Zima.” She emphasized her point with a throwing knife pointed in their direction.
Chapter 1

Darcy jerked upright in the chair she’d sat down in when she got Bucky’s call. Loki stood at her side, a hand at her temple.

“The hell?”

“Your seidr was interacting badly with something, causing pain, I was merely removing the pain. You have very interesting powers, Lady Darcy.”

“Yeah, you could say that. Steve, I need sitrep on all Avengers.” She tried to block the pictures of her friends under the word ‘kill’ on Bucky’s mission brief.

“Tony is at the Dakota safe house with Pepper and, well. Thor is getting you Gatorade with Jane, Bruce is out helping with clean up duty today, Clint and Nat are at HQ filling out forms with Coulson. As of last mandated check five minutes ago, all are alive and well.” He looked at her funny. “Are all the swaps with him so bad?”

“Only when they prep him for a mission. Electric shocks, like I did to Loki.” Both men hissed in sympathy as Thor helped wheel Jane into the intact-ish level of Stark Tower they’d turned into Avenger Central.

“I got you the blue kind, that good?” Jane asked. “The medical response team basing out of five really hates giving up supplies.”

“It’s fine, and we did sort of destroy large chunks of infrastructure, they have a right to be pissy. Someone pull up a conference com, I need to talk to the others.”

Thor passed Jane a tablet and she entered the right codes.

“This is Lieu, I need a sound-off,” Darcy said into the open room.

“Jeez, Lewis, you got your check in five minutes ago. Fine, Iron Man, present.”

“Bruce, present.”

“This is Widow, I’m available but Barton is stuck in a therapy session. Is it wrong to murder incompetents?”

“YES!” said everyone on the line.

“Sammy boy, you with us?”

“Yes I am here Miss Lewis, although I would appreciate a different code name. Sitwell has a cool code name. I have a cool code name. But you never call me Byzantine.”

“Wait, you’re Byzantine? Sorry, I don’t track the real identities of recruits to H.E.R.O. But we have a problem on our hands. Last POW Standing has been reactivated. We’re the targets.”

“Say WHAT now?” Tony demanded.

“Squids are unhappy with us, we’re strong, we work well together, and we are not theirs. As far as they know, he has an excellent making people dead record. Regroup at the Tower when you can. We need to combine knowledge. Lieu, signing off.” She counted the sign-offs and looked at her
“We can do this, Angel,” Steve reassured her.

“I know, it’s just… been so long. I didn’t think I’d have the kinds of extra targets to protect that I do. I…”

“Lady Darcy, if I may,” Loki began softly, like he was expecting her to stop him, “the Avengers are not easy targets. All of them have survived people trying to kill them, I tried to kill some of them, so I know how hard it is. They are warriors who fight beside you, not innocents you must defend.”

“Right. Resources.” She turned her mind to planning, the webbing of false security she had woven under Hydra’s feet, and knew what to do. Hitting a button on her laptop she pinged Natasha. “Is Lucky Thirteen anywhere onsite?”

“I saw her in the elevator, she hit 42.”

“Ok, good. I’m activating Heracles Burn, be advised.”

“Understood. Barton has five more minutes; we’ll be on our way home in ten.”

“That’s more than enough, thanks Nat.”

“Heracles Burn?” Steve asked her.

“Remember the Kilroy letter? Where I told Schmidt his logo sucked?”

“Yeah, many heads versus many tentacles.”

“Heracles slew the original monster of myth by burning the heads, not cutting them off. The burnt heads could not regrow new ones, no two more to take its place. In the world of spies, being outed as a spy is called being burned. See where I’m going?”

“You want to burn all the heads.”

“With napalm if needed,” she agreed happily, then turned back to her phone, hitting the alert app.

**Operation Heracles Burn is going Active in T minus three minutes. Places, people.**

She dialed a number she’d memorized and the call was picked up halfway into the first ring.

“Lucky, you’re on first, I need Black Cat active.”

“Black Cat prepared to launch, do I have an updated target list?”

“Being sent now.” Darcy said as she clicked the send button on the email she had opened a moment before.

“Received. Black Cat going live. Hit ‘em where it hurts, ma’am.”

“Plan to, Lucky, make your Aunt proud.” She hung up and dialed another number.

Steve made sure everyone coming in was up to speed on the operation Darcy was running from her laptop. Bruce nodded and went to grab a shower, which, frankly, was a great idea, because he was
covered in dust and stank. Natasha and Clint just nodded before retreating into the room they’d claimed, and Phil explained they’d all had roles before the Avengers had to go public. He borrowed a computer, Tony left tablets lying around like mints in a bowl, and retreated to a corner to initiate his part of the plan. Tony and Pepper came in and Tony was looking a little steadier than he had right after the whole flying a bomb into space incident. The time with his mother was doing him good.

Darcy wrapped up her work, took a deep breath and started laughing.

“Ok, who broke Short and Bossy?” Tony asked.

“I’m fine, I’m fine, I just. I have the best news.”

“That would be?” Bruce asked.

“Fucking Arnim Zola downloaded his brain onto a cutting edge magnetic tape computer in 1972. Dude has delusions of immortality, but this just means I finally get to off the bastard.”

Steve began laughing too. Fucking Zola tried to save himself, by going the one place Darcy could hurt him worst, inside a computer. It was hysterical, and his laughter bordered on manic. He knew he was unnerving the team-members still around him, but he couldn’t stop until he was wheezing like he hadn’t since 42.

“I do not understand your mirth at the continued existence of a foe,” Loki said to him with a frown. “Is this some… good person thing?”

“No, it’s absolutely not. It’s a revenge thing. Darcy with computers, and her friends, and it’s… what if your worst enemy tried to evade you by becoming pure magic, seidr, and not particularly developed seidr?”

“I could crush them beneath my heel like a… oh.” Loki smiled. “Sister of Shadow, I would like to bestow that celebratory gesture called a “high five” upon you.”

Darcy grinned and held up a hand. “I gladly receive the highest of fives, this is gonna be fun.”

“One problem, Short Stack,” Tony said. “Magnetic tape computers require proximity. Do you know where he is?”

“No, Treasurer is on it, though. When he finds it, well, Bucky’s arm has an EMP bomb in it I’ll need to get rid of somehow. I wonder how much of his core personality and mind will survive an EMP blast that could kill a city power grid? Maybe I should let it off at a distance, let him linger a bit.”

“You are thinking like me,” Loki said. “I request you stop, I am using you as a lesson in being less like me, and you are disrupting my study.”

“Sorry, Loki, I’ll try to be less torture-y. He deserves it though, for the record. Fucking Zola.”

“Amen,” Steve called out, then looked at Tony who had done the same.

“What? Dad talked non-stop about the war, I mean obviously he lied a little, but I still know how you respond to someone saying ‘Fucking Zola’. I also know Dernier was certifiable, but really good with bombs in improvised circumstances. It’s not that weird.” He took a sip of his drink. “Ok, who switched my scotch with apple juice!”

“It doesn’t mix well with shell shock,” Darcy said, not looking up from her laptop. “Or any
medication you might be taking for it. Nat, Pepper, and I hid all the booze in the tower and replaced it with stuff that is tasty and won’t fuck you or Barton up. Thankfully, Eric opted for private care and Steve and Loki can’t get drunk or take medication.”

“You replaced my scotch with apple juice.”

“It’s organic and good for you, Tony,” Pepper told him sternly. “Scotch will only make the night terrors worse. I do want you getting some sleep.”

“Tired science is bad science, Tony,” Jane told him as she cracked open a bottle of water. “We just care about you. If the itch gets too bad, the lab has Kombucha tea, which is mildly alcoholic.”

“If it helps any,” Steve said, knowing it wouldn’t, “I tried the drown the sorrows thing and since I can’t get drunk, it obviously didn’t work, but comparing me the next day to Dugan the next day, I think I’m ok with that. Very cranky when hungover. The time I caught Darcy’s tells me why.”

“Did Captain America just give me the drink responsibly talk?”

“No, your friend Steve just gave you the Future Tony will thank you for not getting hammered talk.” He turned back to Darcy and clapped his palms together. “So, how do we find him?”

“We don’t, he finds us. This is going to be way easier with him trying to get in, than us looking for him. Jarvis, security shutters, if you would be so kind, they might want him sniping.” Metal shutters slammed into place over the windows.

“Will that be all, Miss Lewis?”

“Up the ultra violet light content by 15% please, no need to be more depressed. Thank you.”

“Of course, Miss Lewis.”

He let them gear him up, fit the black mask over his face, even add the stupid glove to his metal hand. It was mostly for show, anyways. Fear was a preferred weapon. Fear created chaos, chaos created more fear, enough fear created people dumb enough to be led to the slaughter willingly. He didn’t care.

They showed him the missions again. Men and women with lists of powers and skills he would need to overcome, weaknesses he could exploit. He stopped at the dark haired woman, touching the blurred picture caught mid-battle, her lips parted in an angry cry. Darcy Lewis. She was listed as a skilled fighter, who had an affinity for electric weapons. No known powers, weaknesses, standard human frailty, and her friendship with one Doctor Jane Foster. He flipped to the page on Thor. Weakness, close relationship to one Doctor Jane Foster. Connections he hadn’t been told to exploit, strange. Captain America, Super human strength, speed, agility, and uses a shield as a weapon. Weaknesses, naive, susceptible to emotional manipulation through civilian targets.

You’re keeping the outfit, right?

You’ll love it; we’re going to the future.

He blinked twice at the words in his head. Familiar, but not. Him, but not him.

“Are you ready?” asked the handler.
“Da.”

“Good. We’ll have a team drop you off near the site tonight. We’re going to help shape the century.”

Yes, yes I am, a part of him thought. And you will never see it coming. He tried to ignore those thoughts as he got into the small plane. Instead he recited a poem in his head he didn’t know when he learned.

Burn the air, and boil the sea. I don’t care, I’m still free, you can’t take the sky from me.

No, that was not him, not what he was made for. He was made for nightmares and hiding, the boogieman who scared the boogeymen.

Tili Tili Bom. Close your eyes soon. Someone's walking by the window, and knocking at the door.

Tili Tili Bom. Can you hear the birds through the night? He’s already made his way into the house, for those who cannot sleep.

He closed his eyes. Soon, the voices in his head would decide what he was. Until then, he had a mission.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Darcy monitors the action, talks with her friends and helps the Winter Soldier break in.

Steve introduces Bucky around and breaks up an argument between the resident cooks.

Bucky leads another Squid squad to their deaths and hears a safe-word.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest Time! To Beth_Mac, quadrad, merrysoul, mouseymightymarvellous, hafizatulsufiahyaacob, Ye, CrazyScifiChick, Valkyriefromunderland, chocolatepureblood, Aewnaur, Musicowler, SerialObsessor (DIStar71), Tracysgate, SailorRoxy, MarauderHeir, ValkyriePhoenix, Shadows_of_Shemai, phoenix_173, BloodElf, Selene_Aduial, Joey99, space_monkey52, Dances_With_Vulcans, AliceMadisonParker, SionnachOiche3, ElisaC and all 83 kudo-ers, because HOLY COW GUYS!

You are all amazing and I love you. Quick ahead of time warning, I'm writing a book for NaNoWriMo, so November may be spotty in posting.

Darcy caught a few naps in between checking the slow unraveling of lies. Everything was working out, just, slowly. Which was what she planned, no need to startle the prey. Her agents were grinding Squid operations to a halt, with misfiled paperwork, blown covers, badly packed provision bags, viruses on computers, and extra red tape that they needed to cut through. All totally normal accidents and bad luck that could happen to anybody. Thirteen was very good at her job. So was Byzantine. She smiled at Phil when the latest report from Treasurer hit her inbox. Five ops held up due to missing requisition forms that nobody had heard of before today. He gave her a tiny nod and went back to revising the channels for obtaining properly back-filled aliases.

Barton had emerged from the room and was in the kitchen making cookies, Bruce was at the stove over some stew type thing that smelled amazing, Natasha was on her phone, Thor and Loki were trying to play chess with Jarvis, using a holographic board. Steve had gone down to five to give blood, because his regenerated so quickly he could do that regularly, and it was one of the few reasons the medical team there hadn’t tried to off any of them for constantly stealing the Gatorade stash. Tony had passed out face down on the sofa, and Jane was off in research land on her computer. All was pretty much well.

“Is it morally wrong to put up a Craigslist personals ad for Rumlow while he’s on a mission?” Nat asked the room. Barton burst out laughing, and Loki suddenly became more interested in the room than the game.

“What is this list of Craig, and why is a personnel advertisement upon it possibly morally wrong?”
“Well,” Bruce explained, “Craigslist is an internet site for posting ads, either to perform a service for money, to hire someone to perform a service, or sell old stuff you don’t want. But they also have a section called personals, which is to find… ah, Darcy, I need an Asgard translation.”

“Personals ads are when you want to find someone to have bedplay with. Or a real relationship, but that’s pretty rare on sites like Craigslist, mostly it’s just people who want a quick roll in the hay. Sex, no lingering attachments. Normally I’d say putting up a personals ad for someone else is petty and mean, most definitely morally wrong, but this is Rumlow in question here. Just to check, this is the same guy we call Crossbones on the under-net, right?”

“Yes, because we are not entirely sure he has a real skull, it might be a cleverly made animatronic replica,” Barton filled in.

“Ok, I hate that jerk. And he reports to the head Squid, so go on and do it. Make it M4M, and paint him as wanting a very tough and masculine partner. His head might explode and then I can finally call the bets on if he has a brain and if so, is it human.” She thought a bit. “Make sure to have an apology gift basket delivered to whoever answers it. I’m not willing to put an innocent bear through that and not apologize.”

“Ok,” Natasha said. “If the responder is attractive enough and passes background checks, can I send the basket with Junior Agent Miller? He likes a nice burly top, and his job makes getting any sex very hard on him. I actually don’t despise Miller, it would be nice to introduce him to someone, right?”

“Make sure Miller’s not currently pining over anyone, and do not tell him it’s a set up. If stuff happens, it happens, if it doesn’t, there is no need to make him think there could have been,” Phil added.

“Good point, Byzantine,” Darcy said. “Ugh, what time is it, Jarvis?”

“It is currently 7:48 in the evening, Miss Lewis.”

“So, sun is setting if not down. Are our outer surveillance systems running again yet?”

“They are. There is also a group of four men on a rooftop opposite us, if the shutters were not down they would have a clean shot.”

“Understood.”

“Understand what?” Steve asked as he came back in.

“Bucky and three orders of Calamari are on a roof that should have been a good perch, except we have the shutters down. I’m going under again to help get him back. You good to catch me, or should we pull Jane?”

“I’ve got you, Angel. Go get our jerk back.”

“Roger that, Captain.” She let him settle in behind her on the bank seat and dropped into Bucky’s head.

Steve caught Darcy’s drooping body and held her up as her head rolled forward. He heard mumbling, and then she, no, Bucky started struggling against him.
“Bucky? Bucky, it's me. It's Steve,” he pleaded.

“Steve? Ty moi missiya.” The struggle got stronger. Bucky had gotten turned around to face him, and Steve was restraining fists coming at him.

“Oh for the love of… Bucky, it’s me, oh come on! Jane? I need help here!

“Eto vremya, kotoryye pytayutsya chelovecheskiye dushi,” Jane called out from across the room in her chair.

Bucky stopped struggling and looked up at him. “Steve, you punk, let go of my arms.”

“Bucky,” he breathed as he loosened his hold. “She told me, but I saw you fall, and… I thought you were dead.”

“And I thought you were smaller. I thought we told you, no more science experiments. Or is that wrong? My memory these days is… not great.”

Steve laughed. “No, we did agree, no more volunteering for science experiments. You’re in Darcy’s body, remember, she’s not that tall.”

“Oh. Wow. We are going to have to figure a way around this, aren’t we? Unless… Steve, if you tell me you fucked up our chance with Darcy, I’m still going to kill you, and it will not have a single thing to do with the Squids.”

“This many years, and you still think with your… Buck, Darcy is very happy to love both of us. And we’re working on figuring out the height difference. There’s been some working with something Darcy calls ‘cowgirl’ that’s been pretty successful.”

“TMI ROGERS!” Barton shouted from the kitchen. “I almost dropped the snicker-doodles, you ass.”

“If Barton’s snicker-doodles are compromised because of anyone, I will hurt them,” Natasha said. “Even you, Zima.” She emphasized her point with a throwing knife pointed in their direction.

“Pauk, you got out!”

“Thanks to you, and a certain crazy Bowman, yes. I go by Natasha now. But I’m still the Chernaya Vdova when I need to be.”

“That’s a girl.”

“And I’ll thank all of you to keep the noise down,” Pepper said. “We finally found a sleeping pill that works on Tony. Do not wake him.”

“Sorry Clint, Nat, Pepper. We’ll try to keep it quiet and clean,” Steve promised.

“Uh, is my memory worse than usual, or did we pick up new friends?” Bucky asked.

“Well, funny story….”

“You and Darcy adopted more strays, didn’t you?”

“Darcy did most of it,” Steve defended. “I’m not responsible for this. Um, these are the Avengers. That’s Iron Man, getting some sack time on the couch, Bruce is Hulk’s smaller and smarter half in the kitchen.”
Bruce looked up from his dish. “I hope your friend likes Ghonto. I’m not changing the recipe now.”

“What’s Ghonto?” Bucky asked him quietly.

“No idea. Food, I think. Can’t be worse than rations.”

“Too true, all too true.”

“It’s a thick stew of vegetables,” Bruce told them. “Steve, come taste this, I think I’m not using enough ginger, but I could have just acclimated to it when I was in Kolkata.” Steve, who of all of them, had the most sensitive pallet, came to accept a spoonful of stew. Bright flavors burst across his tongue.

“I have no idea what you’re doing, but it’s great, keep it up.”

“I told you,” Clint said from the cooling racks. “But you never listen.”

“Hey, cool it Clint, we all know you’re the American Homemaker Extraordinaire, but Bruce has a different skill set.” Steve sighed. How could the team’s marksman be such a fantastic shot, spy, cook, make-up artist, and STILL act like a teenager? “Bucky, that’s Clint, he’s Mad Jack’s upgrade.”

“Mad… oh no. Please tell me crazy archer kilt guy is a figment of my shattered mind.”

“No can do, Zima. Mad Jack was real, and Clint’s favorite sniper of all time. He has a list.”

“Please don’t ever tell me where I am on it, or if I am on it. And, those two are…”

“Thor and Loki,” Steve said. “Yes, those Thor and Loki, although I’ve been told most of those stories came out of bad translating and drunkenness.”

“Except the dress, I did get Thor to wear Mother’s wedding gown once,” Loki said proudly.

“I’m not sure you should get that much happiness out of that,” Natasha said. Steve shook his head.

“Look at Thor, he’s not upset, so it was a fun-prank not a mean-prank.” Turning to Bucky he explained. “We’re working with Nat and Loki about moral guidelines.”

“And to be fair to my brother,” Thor said, wrapping an arm around Loki who only ignored it, “there was indeed drunkenness involved, just not Midgardian drunkenness. I had just become old enough to drink in the mead halls. Waking up to Mother’s fury and a large amount of laughter taught me not to over indulge again.”

“I wonder if I could fly Maria out to wake Tony up when he finds the hidden booze,” Pepper mused. To move them away from that topic, Steve continued introductions.

“This is Pepper, she keeps Tony, Iron Man, alive and mostly functional when not in the suit.”

“Ma’am,” Bucky said while nodding politely. Steve pointed out a little man in a suit working away on a flat sheet of glass with lit figures.

“And that’s Phil Coulson. He’s… complicated.”

“You just introduced me to Norse gods, Steve.”

“And that should give you an idea of Phil. He wears a lot of hats, ok. But he’s good people and
works with Darcy’s group.”

“Oh, well that’s good then. Nice to meet all of you. Darcy’s tugging, I need to do a ride-along. I guess I’ll see you soon?”

Steve got his lover onto a sofa and watched the muscles go slack.

<^>

Bucky had enjoyed meeting the Avengers, even if they were rather… odd. They still seemed pretty swell, and good company for his loves, especially with two of them working on the thin line Darcy had to dance on when she helped him. Right, wrong, it was all hard to determine when you’d made choices like she had. Sliding in beside Darcy, though, was a familiar pleasure. Her mind holding his like the hands they’d never held in real life.

What do you need Doll?

They want to cut through the lobby, but we have people on five, civilians, injured, medics.

Fuck that. Do we have a better play? Tell me we have a better play.

There’s a back loading bay that opens into a separate set of service stairs and elevators, but I don’t know how to tell them that.

“The front is too messy. We waste time. That size of building, service entrances. Easier access, fewer obstacles.”

“You’re a bit chatty today, Asset.”

And you’re a bit stupid, he thought to himself. Doll, clear the back.

“Ya khochu domoy. Let’s move.”

He led them to the back, where the sliding garage doors opened as he hunched over the key pad. He smiled under the mask. They slowly and silently worked their way up the stairs and he sighed a bit in relief when they passed the large number 5 on a door. After what felt like forever, they got to the right floor, and he grabbed the handle, felt it unlock, and yanked hard, clearing the others to rush into a dark room that still smelled of the spicy vegetable stew and the sweet sugar, vanilla, and cinnamon of Clint’s snicker-doodles. He counted to fifty in Russian, then back down to zero in English, before entering the room.

“Sputnik,” said a soft male voice he didn’t know.

Darcy? Darcy!

He was out before he fully registered falling unconscious.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Thirteen- Sharon Carter’s Codename.
Byzantine- Phil Coulson’s Codename.
Back-filled alias- a cover that has a past and stands up to strong scrutiny.
Bear- a burly or overtly masculine gay man.
Ty moi missiya- you are my mission. (Russian)
Eto vremya, kotoryye pytayutsya chelovecheskiye dushi- these are the times that try men's souls. (Russian)
Cowgirl- a sex position with the woman on top.
TMI- stands for "too much information" and indicates you've just shared something your friends had no need to know.
Zima- winter, in Russian. Nat's nickname for Bucky.
Pauk- spider, in Russian. Bucky and Darcy's nickname for Nat.
Chernaya Vdova- black widow. (Russian.)
Ghonto- a traditional Kolkatan veggie stew.
Wears a lot of hats- to have many jobs or roles.
Ya khochu domoy- I want to go home. (Russian)

Notes:
One of the better ways to bring something huge down is to jam the minutiae of the operation. All those tiny "accidents" will get written off, but also slowly but surely demolish any effectiveness of the Sheildra operators. Paperwork is especially insidious as it is normally there to get you what you need.

The skull and crossbones symbol is usually used to indicate toxic nature. Brock Rumlow, however toxic he may be, is called Crossbones, both because that's his actual comic book villain name and because I wanted to crack a joke about his idiocy/emotional lack of depth.

Jane is using a code phrase to help Bucky-as-Darcy break any orders he might be carrying. This was done with his knowledge and exists mostly on Darcy's end, so the wipes don't super affect it. They picked a Russian translation of something super tied to American history (it's the opening of The Crisis, by Thomas Paine) so it would never get said in any other context.

Most Bengali cuisine does indeed use a lot of ginger. If you get used to it, it can be hard to tell if you aren't using enough, or if you've just adapted.

I know I brought Mad Jack Churchill up in the last one, but really guys, he was awesome, and holds the title of Last Known Kill in a War using a Welsh Longbow. He was insane, and very cool.

There is indeed a story in the Eddas where Loki does... something, I really can't remember, but to get out of trouble for it, he convinces Thor to dress up as a bride, using Frigga's wedding dress.

Sputnik was one of the safety codes implanted by the Red Room in the comics. It basically knocks him out and resets him to the last brainwashing. (Which did not involve the chair in the comics I don't think, but I'm using it that way.)

Teaser:

“This collection is quite aware what it is to be controlled,” Loki said coldly. “We, as
your Lady Darcy puts it, dealt. If you cannot, you are not a worthy mate to my Shadow Sister, anyway."
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Darcy watches Tony dismantle the safety devices in Bucky’s arm and engages in creative interrogation and debriefing.

Steve talks to his new friends about a variety of things, worries over Bucky, and has to use the Swear Jar.

The Soldier wakes up and Bucky remembers, in that order, but he's not exactly happy about that order.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To quadrad, Valkyriefromunderland, SerialObsessor (DIStar71), Aewnaur, sara47q, MarauderHeir, Maedae84, ValkyriePhoenix, Shadows_of_Shemai, tigrislilium, AliceMadisonParker, Musichowler, Joey99, Crystallea1321, SoraSings, SionnachOiche3, Notashamed, and the 37 new kudo-ers.

Again, I must warn I might not be able to post as frequently. I have another paper due next week. School, ugh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy took a mostly backseat position for the actual infiltration itself, using her own voice to tell Jarvis when to open certain security measures and letting everyone get in place in the now darkened floor. Their eyes had adjusted to the darkness as Jarvis slowly brought the light intensity up in the stairwell, leaving the attackers night-blind and easy to disarm and disable. If she was a little too rough, well, at least her target didn’t stain the carpet, unlike the one Loki riddled with daggers.

Phil took the most important safe-word embedded in Bucky’s mind. A one-time use paralytic and knock-out. It was hard to watch, but it would have been harder to do. Jarvis eased the lights back up so they could tie up the remaining living attacker and disarm him. Steve winced as Jane turned on the zapper. Thor helped Darcy move Bucky to the sofa now vacated by Tony.

“We need to move fast, I don't know how long this will keep him under and there are a fuckton of nerves along that artery. Tony? Do you have the kit ready?” she called as she pulled the metal arm up so she could better reach the access panel.

“Right here, Lewis, what do you need?”

“There’s an EMP in his arm that can be remote detonated. Aside from killing all the power in Manhattan, it disables the safety on a vial of something bad, dumping it into his blood. The access is under the star, here, but I never saw inside it.”
“I hate flying blind,” Tony muttered as he fumbled at the plate.

“Then don’t,” Natasha said. “I can get you in, but I never knew how to disable the workings.”

Darcy moved aside to let them work. She didn’t know she’d been chewing the edge of her thumb until Steve pulled her hand down and bandaged the raw spot. He held her, and everyone stayed quiet as the delicate work was done inside Bucky’s arm. The whole room took a collective breath when Tony handed Natasha the EMP, and everyone held it until the vial of murky fluid followed.

“Is that blood?” Pepper asked. The top was indeed smeared red.

“Yes, and I really need something to stop the bleeding here!” Tony said, strained. Bruce darted forward with a clear bottle, and Tony went back to work. A minute later, he closed the panel and stepped back. “Pep, antimicrobial spray?”

Pepper stepped up to spritz an astringent smelling fluid on his hands and give him a wet wipe to get the blood and grease off.

“He should be fine,” Natasha told Darcy and Steve.

“What was that stuff Doctor Banner gave Tony?” Steve asked.

“Superglue,” Bruce replied. “I know it sounds dumb, but it works.”

“Well, it was originally formulated as a battle-field substitute for stitches,” Phil said calmly.

“I’ve used it,” Clint said coming in with a shiny mesh box about the size of a shoebox. “I believe this is the faraday cage you wanted, Tony. Who’s hungry?”

With the bomb in the cage where it couldn’t be set off and one of Tony’s robots securing the vial, everyone was eager to get to the delayed dinner. Darcy couldn’t honestly say she tasted it, which was a shame, Bruce was a really good cook. But her mind was too focused on Bucky, waiting for him to wake up. She noticed Steve eating somewhat mechanically, and figured he was also worried.

“Ok, I have to do something, or I’m going to go crazy,” she told the group. “Phil, you got the list of safe-words Treasurer gave us, right?”

“Yes. I’m still not sure how you managed to get him undercover, but yes, I have it.”

“Good, if Bucky goes Soldier and needs any of them, use the one-shots first, try not to use a reactivating one, and don’t abuse it, ok? I’ll be in the bathroom with our new buddy.”

“We’ll take good care of him, Darcy, go do what you need to,” Pepper said kindly.

“Can you try to avoid blood-stains on the marble?” Tony asked.

“What do I look like, an amateur?” Darcy asked, mock offended.

“Of course not, you look like a woman in pain,” Pepper shot back. "That tends to go with blood stains, I’ve found. And I walked in on enough scandals of Tony’s to know he has the same associations. If you need self-heating eyelash curlers, there’s a pair and some cleanser in a box under the sink. I think the iron is in the hall closet.”

“Thanks Pepper.”

<^>
Steve wasn’t sure what it said about him that he was so happy that their team was so helpful to Darcy in her need to torture a man. He wasn’t sure what it said about them that they were in fact that helpful. And he had no idea how self-heating eyelash curlers worked or why Darcy would want them in an interrogation. He had a few too many ideas about how the iron would be used, and wasn’t sure he should be that… creative in the matter. He was sure he was worried about Bucky. He nearly jammed a spoonful of stew into his cheek when Bucky groaned on the sofa.

“Relax, Steve,” Jane said from the end of the table, where her leg was up to one side in its cast. “He hardly ever got real sleep, he’s just fine napping. Eat, at your metabolic rates, you need at least a third helping.”

“And besides,” Phil said, “it’s rude not to appreciate the work Bruce and Clint put into dinner and desert.” He sounded so much like Steve’s Ma, that Steve automatically felt bad about how blandly he’d reacted to the food.

“It is really good, Bruce. I don’t think I’ve ever eaten anything like it. Where’d you learn?”

“Kolkata, I was hiding there when Nat recruited me. Good food, very different approach to seasonings than Western cuisine. It’s all opposing forces, sweet and spicy, sour and bitter, that kind of thing.” He looked lost in thought. “You know, it’s a bit like a chemical formula. I bet we could do a chemical analysis of the top masala ingredients and figure out the best mix based on pH values and protein and saccharide complexity.”

“No doing Science at the dinner table, Bruce,” Jane reminded him. “Besides, we don’t have a functional lab for that yet, and you promised Darcy not to do any more experiments until we get Doctor Ross back, remember?”

“Ok, that’s fair. I can wait. Besides, I’m really liking working with the clean-up crews. You guys should give it another shot,” he said, nodding to where Loki and Tony were sitting.

“Uh-uh, no way. You are my Science Bro, and I love you, but no. Do you remember last time? I got mobbed by press and those girls who dress up like me that hang out around the Tower. One of them had a really impressive chest-plate.”

“Tony…” Pepper said warningly.

“I meant that on a technical level, Pep! It was very realistic! I wanted to give her my card so I could snag her for R and D, but I know what everyone would say, and I didn’t want to do that to her.”

“What would everyone say?” Loki asked, probably to avoid mention of his own, ill-advised attempt to help with the rebuilding, which ended rather abruptly when he used seidr to get a wedged beam shifted off a man, and people began muttering about mutants.

“That she exchanged sex with me, for a good job,” Tony told him bluntly. “The press can get nasty, because I used to be a total man-slut, and they like making it seem like that’s the women’s fault. Only now, it means I can’t even hire a woman without five layers of buffer, despite there being some fantastic women in the field. I really wish I could tell Past Me not to do that, it’s put a huge dent in the new hires I make.”

Thor and Loki exchanged a look. “I do not understand,” Thor said. “On Asgard, should a pair decide to partake in bed-sport, it means nothing of a trade. And any who protested should one recommend another to a post, based on possible past relation would be laughed from the room.”

“Tony,” Pepper said very seriously. “For our anniversary, I want to go to Asgard for a week.”
“I’ll see if I can work that out with Thor, Babe.”

“Is that screaming?” Steve asked out of nowhere.

“That’s Darcy at work,” Natasha said.


“Get Darcy,” Steve said, as he bolted from the table to support Bucky.

He came awake slowly, long held instinct keeping his breathing easy as he listened to his captors. They discussed chemical compounds and mobs and Asgard. A very familiar voice asked about the faint sounds of torture coming from another wall. Then another familiar voice said “Darcy”. He didn’t fully know what it meant, just that it was vitally important, that she was vitally important. It over-rode the careful deception and he sat up, demanding what they knew of her, where she was, for that matter, where he was.

“Ona v vannaya, Zima,” a redhead who felt familiar said. Black Widow, deadly in hand-combat, resourceful, skilled at espionage. Mission Orders: Kill. There was no way to do that with her compatriots beside her.

“The bathroom?” he asked, trying to remain non-aggressive until he could strike.

“Working. I’ll get her,” offered the man beside her in a ruffled purple apron. Hawkeye, skilled marksman, highly rated in hand to hand, willing to use unorthodox weapons. Mission Orders: Kill. He disappeared and the first familiar voice spoke again, a tall, strong man. Captain America, super human strength, speed, agility, and uses a shield as a weapon. Mission Orders: Kill.

“Bucky, do you know who we are?”

“Black Widow, Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, Hawkeye just left. Some civilians.”

“You have no clue who we are. Fuck!”

“Captain Rogers,” said a voice from nowhere that made him jump. “You asked me to remind you of the Swear Jar Protocol.”

“Aw rats. Ok, um, put in a week of dish duty please.”

“Of course, Captain Rogers.”

“Who was that?” he asked cautiously.

“Jarvis. He’s… hard to explain. No, Tony.” The Captain pointed behind him at Iron Man, no suit, but the briefing had been very clear to assume he had high technical weapons capacity at all times.

“I didn’t say anything!”

“I can tell when you’re about to speak Science, and it’s very disorienting, even for me. Bucky’s still having problems.”

“Ok, so why was I hauled out of an interrogation by a man in a frilly purple apron? It’s undermining to my credibility… Bucky? James?” Darcy Lewis. Conflicting knowledge hit his mind, a dossier, a large man unconscious in garbage. A photo of rage, a song about sky.
“He doesn’t know us, Angel.”

“He will. Jane, I’m initiating a download, I don’t have time for the hat. Sorry.”

“Get your man back. We can do that later.”

She looked in his eyes, a soft hand on his face, her red lips turned into what might be a smile if her eyes didn’t hold so much hurt. Knowledge flooded his mind. She was there beside him. He felt tears on his face.

Welcome home, Bucky.

I… there’s so much.

You gave me what was important when it was going to be lost. A flash of fear and the Chair. I kept it safe, and now it’s yours again. You’re free.

They took the sky. A refrain of violin music played between them.

I took it back. Really Bucky, you know me, I don’t give up what’s mine without a fight. I love you.

I love you too.

And Steve loves you.

And I love Steve… and… Bodies sliding against one another, love and passion and a jerk and a punk planning to make the world accept them. I didn’t think I gave you that one.

You didn’t. It’s Steve’s. He gave me a few like that to pass on when you were low.

A jolt of memento…

Yeah. There are a few of mine in there too.

A uniform, a newspaper ad, a kiss.

And we can… now, I mean.

Yes, we so totally can. But you have to come home to us.

What?

Where are our arms?

The two were locked in struggle, one hand of hers pinning his flesh hand as the other levered room on her neck in a losing battle with the metal. He relaxed everything, she slumped back into Steve.

“Dollface, I’m so sorry. I… I shouldn’t be here.” He stood to go and Hawkeye, Clint pushed him down with one hand. His face was stern and hard, at odds with the ruffled purple apron.

“If you run out on them after the absolute hell they went through getting you back, I will pincushion you with arrows until you look like a voodoo doll with a metal arm, asshole.”

“This collection is quite aware what it is to be controlled,” Loki said coldly. “We, as your Lady Darcy puts it, dealt. If you cannot, you are not a worthy mate to my Shadow Sister, anyway. She may mourn, but nobody ever accused me of being good, and I’d rather she be sad and have the
chance at finding someone who deserves her strength and love, than sad and tied to a weak shell that cannot admit his failings and attempt repair.”

“Dude, did you just give the most feared assassin on the planet the shovel talk?” Darcy asked, her voice rough.

“I believe you gave similar to my brother, who is regarded as a god. Why are you less deserving of this warning to a suitor than Seidkonur Foster?”

“Fair point. But if he runs, be aware I will chase his ass down myself to preform percussive maintenance on his dumb self-loathing issues. I’ll tap you in if and only if I need assistance.”

“Understood, Shadow Sister.”

“So, anyway, Bucky, meet the new fam. I got adopted.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Flying blind- working on a machine/person (used by both engineers and MDs) with no way of knowing how any of it will look until you're on a clock because you opened it and started messing around.
Faraday cage- a box that blocks incoming or outgoing wireless signals.
ph values- the acid to base scale.
Saccharide- the basis of all sugars.
Gde ona? Gde ye?- Where is she? Where am I? (Russian.)
Ona v vannaya, Zima.- She is in the bathroom, Zima. (Russian.)
Seidkonur- Female of Seidmadr, the title Loki uses for Doctors of the non-medical kind. (Asgardian.)

Notes:
Darcy had Phil use the word to knock Bucky out because they didn't know if he had surveillance on him, and this makes it look more like he was actually taken out, not rescued. Also, it keeps him from feeling pain as they do a super fast surgery before the Squids activate the dead-man's switch and the bomb goes off.

Superglue, or an older version, was originally made for use as 'liquid stitches' in battle zones when you didn't have time for proper stop and stitch it shut sutures.

Eyelash curlers are scary tools to crimp eyelashes into a curl with pressure, heat, or both, and the self heating ones are almost more scary, despite safety precautions. Steve knows what a regular metal one would look like, they were invented in 31, and looked like this: https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/pages/USD83872-0.png So you can understand his disturbed-ness.

The girl with the impressive chest plate was totally Skye, and for more on "Asgard is not here for your sexism” please see Out of Body Experience, chapter 2.

This is a pink version of Clint's apron:
A Swear Jar is usually a jar everyone in the household has to put some amount of money into if they cuss, but as this is a mix of people and only Steve is really trying to quit, he has Jarvis sign him up for more chores when he swears.

Teaser:

“You’re a sap, Rogers.”
“You’re the guy who fell for a sap, so what does that make you?”
“The bug in the amber that helped the crazy guy make dinosaurs in that one movie.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Darcy handles complicated emotions, sparring, a shared fear of falling, and Bucky's guilt.

Steve sees a new side to Darcy's pain, learns something from Bucky, and shares a movie.

Bucky sees how much Darcy is hurting and goes on a massive guilt trip that ends in a kiss.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To aquadrop25, quadrad, ValkyriePhoenix, mouseymightymarvellous, Snowdove30, Valkyriefromunderland, iwanttoreadmore, mischiefcat, Notashamed, Jade01, sara47q, SerialObsessor (DiStar71), mystormygurl1, MarauderHeir, Sergeant_Disaster, Shadows_of_Shemai, space_monkey52, BloodElf, ElisaC, Ye, wellheregoesnothing, rosiedeplume, Selene_Aduial, tigrisilium, SoraSings, SionnachOiche3, chaos, psyche29, Musicowler and the 82 new kudo-ers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy had run into that situation a little too fast. She had known Sputnik was a shutdown code, she hadn’t known it was a reset. When he went for her throat even as she poured memories of love into his mind, she had only a moment to wave everyone back and wedge a few fingers between her carotid and his hand. The other hand was held with a nerve lock weakening his push-back as she tried to get him to remember. She had saved all of this for him. She had gone through hell, for him, for them, for the love they shared, and it was tempting to just choke out another command and forget it. Walk away. Forget everything they’d shared, wipe her mind clean of the blood she spilled for him and start over.

But that was the easy way out, and she hadn’t lied, she never gave up without a fight.

Seeing his guilty look as she rubbed the forming bruises, she realized, this, this was what had worried Jane so badly about her episodes. Not the blankness, not the pain, not the crying or the screaming. The guilt. Clint and Loki stepping up just made the point a little clearer than she maybe wanted. She had to let go of her guilt to get Bucky to let go of his.

After another round of introductions, again explaining how she got two Norse gods as brothers, and learning Bucky couldn’t keep the stew down, she brought a nutritional shake to him in the non-interrogation bathroom where Steve was helping him get rejected food out of his hair.

“It’s still nutrient sludge, but it’s chocolate flavored. Sort of a step up, I guess. We’ll look into how to work you back onto real food.”
Bucky took it without a word, but after a sip became a gulp and she slowed him down, he smiled. It was awkward, like he had forgotten how. “Thanks, Doll. I don’t want to be too much of a bother.”

“James Buchanan Barnes, you stop that nonsense this instant, you hear me?” she snapped. The tensions of the day made her harsher than intended, and his eyes flew wide. “You are not a bother, not ever. Nothing I do to help you is a bother, a burden, or any other idiotic, self-flagellating, untrue, moronic noun that might be running through that pretty head of yours. I will not give you up without a fight, whether I’m fighting a freaking Kraken of Squid-Nazis, or your own shellshock.” She looked at his shocked face and noticed the finger she’d been poking him with was trembling. “I need to go. Steve?”

“I’ve got him, Angel, you go. Take Loki or Clint with you.”

She nodded and stalked out into the common room. “Loki, you want to go do some sparring?” she asked far too casually. She saw not only Loki, but Nat and Clint look up at her. She pressed her shaking hand harder into her leg.

“It would be a pleasure, Shadow Sister.”

“If you guys don’t mind, Nat and I need to get back in the habit. We haven’t sparred in a while,” Clint said, although everyone knew by ‘a while’ he meant ‘since she beat me unconscious when I tried to kill her’. Nat looked uncomfortable, but stiffly nodded.

“I should probably tag along, too,” Phil said casually. “I haven’t done a proper evaluation of Barton’s hand to hand in a month. There is paperwork, you know.”

“We know!” chorused everyone there. Phil’s love of a good form was a running joke.

Down in the partially destroyed floor they used as a Gym, Darcy took on three Loki-clones of varying solidity. Part of the challenge for her was figuring out which one she could ignore and which she had to hit. Part of the challenge for him was directing multiple copies in different actions simultaneously while also keeping her on her toes and not hitting the most solid copy, which relayed the pain to him. The fights were normally creative, fast, and athletic. This one was direct, sloppy, and came to an abrupt halt when her shaking fist slammed into open air and she overbalanced a touch too close to the open window.

Clint dodged Nat just in time to run and grab Darcy’s arm. He and Loki pulled her back inside shaking and keening through clenched teeth. Natasha pet her hair and sang an eerie Russian lullaby. When she stopped her muffled scream, Darcy looked up to see Phil had brought her a pillow. When she hugged it to her chest it smelled of Steve.

“It took the liberty, in case you happened to need it.”

“Stalker,” she said into the pillow.

“With the best intentions. You’ve had a lot happen. Not just today, although I imagine having Bucky back is causing more distress than normal.”

“But I love him,” Darcy said, frowning in confusion.

“Yes, and because you love him, you put yourself through a lot of pain. It’s hard to sort out what hurts from what you feel about him.”

“Can we move away from the ledge? I hate falling.” She knew they all saw the deflection for what it was, but Loki scooped her up and carried her like a kid back to the elevator.
“I hate falling too,” he told her.

“Falling sucks bilgesnipe balls,” she replied solemnly and he smiled at her. “I never asked, why do you make the sparring clones with blue eyes?’’

“Because I am making opponents for you. I am not your enemy now, but then… I am very glad you are my brother’s Lightning Sister.”

“Hey Nat?” Clint asked from her other side. “If I wear color contacts will you feel better fighting me?”

“I… maybe? I’m not used to this feeling. Guilt. I don’t like it and it hampers my ability,” she admitted lowly.

“I’ll order a box of electric blue and one of brown,” Coulson said, making a note. “We can see if the blue works, and if it doesn’t we can try brown, for a totally different look. We’ll figure it out.”

“If it helps any, Lady Natasha, I was very happy to be freed, even though it was painful and made accessing my seidr difficult for a while afterwards.”

“I’ve already told her I was glad she did it, Loki. It’s… different.” Clint looked at the red head beside him. “It’s harder to accept you hurt someone you… care, for. Even if you meant well.”

Darcy understood that. Suddenly, like the lightning Thor named her after, she understood Bucky a little more. “Especially if you mean well, Clint. I need to go see Bucky.”

Steve had honestly never seen Darcy as furious as when she told Bucky off for one simple word. It was terrifying. He’d seen that rage before, but it had always been controlled, directed, safe, for him at least, because he had never been the target. This was raw and unchained, and when she left, he instinctively pulled Bucky closer.

“I’ve never seen… she doesn’t… I’m sure she didn’t mean to be so…” he gave up trying to explain it.

“You haven’t. I have,” Bucky said quietly. “Not, not with Darcy, but with Natalia, I think. They sent her to kill for the first time and she came back… different. She’d killed before, of course, to desensitize her to it, but in a controlled space. I don’t know what her mission was, but she came back covered in blood and everything about her was… sharp, brittle, like broken glass. Darcy had to talk her down. She’s hurting, but she feels bad about being the one to hurt. She told Natalia “ne sravnit’ shramy”, do not compare scars.” Bucky looked up at him. “She’s going to be fire and a thousand shards of broken glass until she can learn that for herself, and we can’t really stop that. Loki and Clint, they’ll help?”

“They have the closest set of experiences to call on when it comes to doing things you regret, and they are both totally loyal to her.”

“Good. Priyatno slyshat’, ona nuzhdayetsya v tom, chto.”

“I don’t speak Russian, Buck.”

“Was I… oh. Sorry.” He hung his head and Steve tipped his chin up.

“I don’t mind it, really, if I have to, I’ll learn. I just wanted to make sure you were aware what you
were saying wasn’t understood. I always want to be able to listen when you tell me things.”

“You’re a sap, Rogers.”

“You’re the guy who fell for a sap, so what does that make you?”

“The bug in the amber that helped the crazy guy make dinosaurs in that one movie.”

“You watched Jurassic Park?”

“With Jane, when Darcy took one of my missions. It was pretty good, I kinda thought the Raptors worked like the Howlies, you know?”

“There are sequels, you get to them?”

“No, not really, the mission was short on that end, only one movie and I think I missed the very end bit. They were ready to leave and stuff, but I swapped out before they actually left the island.”

“You wanna go watch them?”

“Yeah, fake blood makes the real stuff not as upsetting. Does the sequel have another annoying person who dies because they were dumb?”

“No spoilers.”

Darcy came in during the middle of the third Jurassic Park movie, and Bucky tried to hide his grimace at the ugly purple marks on her neck. Marks he put there. He would have moved away, but Steve had fallen asleep on his lap, and it seemed… wrong to wake him.

“Hey,” she said, aiming for casual and missing by a mile.

“Hi.” Oh, nice, that’s a real good way to greet the dame who risked her own life to give you back your soul, he thought.

“I’m sorry about yelling,” she said, and he wanted to interrupt, but she stopped him. “I don’t like your guilt issues, because I don’t agree that you did something to warrant them. But I’d be a huge hypocrite if I told you that you couldn’t have them. I know a thing or two about feeling I hurt someone important to me, or feeling like dead weight, and it sucks. But I personally want to move past that. I hope you’ll be on that road too, I prefer not being alone.”

“Dollface, you scolded me, I put bruises on you. But, if you still want me beside you, that’s where I’ll be. Well, when the punk here wakes up.”

Darcy lifted Steve’s feet and sat under them. “Oh good, the Aviary is coming up, I love this part.” And as simple as that, he knew she forgave him. That was the thing about Darcy he thought as people were fake pecked to death by animatronic flying dinosaurs on screen, she would never give up, not even on lost causes. Which probably made Steve and him the luckiest men on the planet.

As the Raptor parents took back their eggs, she slid a hand over and twined her fingers with his metal hand. It didn’t have great sense-input, it was a weapon more than a prosthetic, but the feeling of her hand pressing back on the more sensitive trigger receptor made him happy. Darcy was the special kind of crazy, to treat it that way. He helped her sleepwalk Steve to their room, with an enormous bed, and get him into sleep pants and a fresh shirt before tucking him in.
“He’s so sweet when he’s sleeping,” she commented.

“Yeah, he’s a real treat, except when he’s awake.”

“You know, I do believe the subject of a kiss was discussed?” she asked him, looking up shyly through thick dark lashes. “You want to revisit that topic now, or later?”

“Both, as often as you want to, Doll.” She popped up on tip-toe to peck chastely at his mouth. “I don’t think that really counts.”

“You get to kiss me, if you can catch me!” she said and ran down a hall. He caught up with her and lifted her by the backside up against a wall to kiss her properly. He pulled back only briefly when a draft from a cracked window or vent brushed his neck. The tube, the cryo, the cold showers before that. He put her down gently and backed up.

“I… it’s like it’s all real… or is this not real.”

“Everything is only as real as you make it,” she told him. “I’m exhausted, let’s go convince Steve to share.”

Tucked between them, Steve’s arm acting as a second pillow and Darcy’s lower body acting as a second blanket, he thought this, this was definitely worth fighting for. The Squids would never know what hit them, until it was too late, because he was no summer soldier, and this right here was something he would always protect.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Priyatno slychat’, ona nuzhdayetsya v tom, chto- good to hear, she needs that.

Notes:
The carotid arteries are major blood vessels in the neck that supply blood to the brain, neck, and face. There are two carotid arteries, one on the right and one on the left. If they both become blocked, oxygen will stop entering the brain, and after ten seconds, the person will pass out. Protecting the carotids is an important part of fighting back against a strangling move.

People who have been starved, or put on liquid or intravenous nutrients tend to vomit if they go for real food too soon.

A lot of people recovering from trauma, physical or mental, tend to see the care they are given as "being a burden" even if the care is freely offered. It can be hard on caretakers to hear that, especially if, like Darcy, they are also recovering.

Phil is not going to do paperwork, he's there to be an emotional spotter, because everyone can see Darcy is on some kind of edge, and Nat and Clint have their own issues in a sparring environment.

Nat is singing Tili Tili Bom, the song that Soldier had in his head earlier. It was one of the few approved songs in the Red Room. Here's a link:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDMj5WgB8c
The Raptors in the first Jurassic Park movie do indeed employ hunting methods that are similar to the attack patterns of tightly coordinated military squads. Jurassic World has not come out yet at this point in canon or there would be a huge debate about which Howlie was most like which Raptor.

Fake blood, no matter how well done, is almost always easy to spot from real if you have seen a lot of real blood. Not all vets like movies with fake blood, but I do know a few who find it funny and it helps them.

Flashbacks to trauma can sometimes make the escape from trauma feel like a dream, and the flashback is the reality. It can be hard to tell which is which. A trick my therapist gave me was "There is no spoon" a scene from one of the Matrix movies where a boy bends a spoon with his brain because, as he says, there is no spoon. If the reality is what you choose to make real, then you can choose to be free from the trauma, not stuck in it. It's not easy, but you keep reminding yourself, everything, good and bad, is only as real as you let it be, because there is no spoon.

Teaser:

“Either we’re opening a bakery, which would be epic, or you have a problem. Your problems are my problems, Clint, you’re on my team. Spill.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Darcy introduces her boys to the glam that is RuPaul, gets Nat to stop acting like a wuss about Clint, and plots a devastating blow to Hydra.

Steve gets really interested in the phenomenon of Drag, reassures Darcy, and helps coordinate the team's cover for the back blow of Darcy's scheme.

Bucky teases Steve, takes a nap, and decides smoothies are really very tasty and Darcy is really very scary if she's not on your side, and sometimes when she is.

Chapter Notes


Everybody have a safe and happy Halloween, I'll see you again soon.

Darcy woke up to find she’d somehow migrated into the middle of a super-soldier sandwich. Not that she would ever complain about that, but she knew she’d fallen asleep beside Bucky, with Steve opposite, and neither of them moved in their sleep much, which meant….

“Bucky?” she whispered at the mop of brown hair nuzzled into her boob.

“Yeah?” he responded as he looked up with sleepy blue eyes.

“Did you move me?”

“Yeah, you were talking in your sleep about bein’ cold, so I helped you shift over me. Warmer now?”

“Yes. Maybe too warm. You two are like furnaces, you know that right? Fleming thinks it’s your body’s increased metabolism from the serum, you burn all those calories you have to eat and like anything that burns, you get hot.”

“I feel like there’s a joke in there about what I looked like before the serum,” Steve said on her other side.

“You told me the serum only amplified what was already there, sexy,” Darcy said. “Good becomes great, and the fun-size hotness becomes a jumbo-size 100% pure American Beefcake. I thought you
were hot even when your hands were always frickin’ cold, and from some of the stuff you gave me for Bucky, I’d say he agreed.”

“Absolutely. The sexiest punk in all of Brooklyn, and there were a lot of them. Steve ever tell you about the time he did a cabaret performance?”

“No and I feel that was an egregious oversight. Captain Rogers, what do you have to say for yourself?” she mock-demanded, sitting up and crossing her arms under her breasts, which, despite the fact he’d played with them quite a lot just last morning, still made him turn bright red.

“It was real cute, wasn’t it Steve?” Bucky prodded. “In that pink get-up and the wig…”

“I was in the chorus, and I was only filling in because Leslie had a black eye, alright! It’s not like I was a star,” he protested.

“And suddenly so much of how good you were at makeup during your USO tour makes more sense,” Darcy said nodding. “I thought that cat’s eye you did on Jill looked very RuPaul.”

“Who’s Rue Paul?” both men asked. Darcy blinked.

“Ok, we need to fix this, to the Entertainment Center!”

She got them changed into comfortable clothing, stashed on the couch with blankets, and asked Jarvis to play a marathon of RuPaul’s Drag Race before going to prepare popcorn. She found Clint in the kitchen and from the four cooling racks of baked goods, she could tell he was not happy.

“Ok, Sir Shoots-a-lot, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he lied. It was a good lie, but his eyes didn’t quite sell it.

“Either we’re opening a bakery, which would be epic, or you have a problem. Your problems are my problems, Clint, you’re on my team. Spill.”

“I feel useless, ok?” he said, slapping an oven mitt on the counter. “I can’t be on the Heracles Burn team because I ditched my cover, I can’t spar with Nat, I can barely get Nat to even talk to me… who am I if I can’t be an Agent or a friend, or a… you know what, never mind.”

“I think I will mind, and you can’t stop me, Barton.” Darcy tapped the com she’d taken to wearing. “Romanov, I need a stat on Barton STAP.” She slid the switch that made it come out her phone and set her phone to speaker while speaking.

“Barton is in… svyataya mat' Bozhe. No, this isn’t happening, this can’t happen again, no. I’ll find him, I swear, if I have to track him down to Budapest, I swear I will.”

“Nat, NAT!” Darcy called into the static.

“I can’t lose him again,” came a tiny little voice she would never associate with the Black Widow if she hadn’t known her when she was twelve.

“Then go to the kitchen and tell him that, glupaya devchonka! My popcorn is ready; I want this sorted out before I get to season three’s finale.” She smiled as she passed Nat in the hall, her with five packs of microwave popcorn in a punch bowl and Nat at a dead sprint.

“You seem chipper,” Bucky remarked as she sat down and passed him the bowl.

“Our little spider is all grown up and having feelings about boys,” she told him smugly. “She takes
after you in the eleventh hour declarations department.”

“Who do I get to threaten?”

“Clint, you know, the one who already threatened to use you as a dartboard if you ran out on me. Don’t worry, I’ll do the shovel talk.”

“But she’s my girl, shouldn’t the Papa do that?”

“What century is it again? I know you’re the one with memory problems but I felt a distinct draft of 1950’s sexism there.”

“Ok, fine.”

“Good thing you got that settled,” Steve said, “They’re going to be lip-syncing for their lives, so shush.”

Steve decided he really liked this RuPaul character. She was utterly glamorous and also very scary in those amazing gowns and big hairdo’s but also sassy and take-charge when in a suit. And he liked the little cuts where the Queens talked about themselves and why they wore what they wore and how the contest was impacting them, and what they’d do if they won all that stuff. He grabbed a tablet to look up more on drag queens during the breaks between seasons when Darcy went to make more popcorn.

“Wow, hey Bucky, did you know there are drag nuns?”

“Wait, what now?”

“The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, they minister to folks who don’t get a lot of good options because their queer, and they stand up to bullies who say the same stuff that got said to me. They have a Queer Army to fight Homophobia and they perform and pass out free condoms. Technically, they’re heretics, but I think it’s real keen, and doing a lot of stuff Jesus did.”

“You gonna join?” Bucky teased him, but it was a real smile.

“Nah, I still got that fear of nuns from back when they wacked us with the rulers. Besides, I don’t have a good face for a wimple.”

“And you might have to take a vow of chastity, and I just can’t allow that,” Bucky said as Darcy came in.

“Why might Steve of the uber stamina have to go chaste? I think that might be against the law or something.”

“There are drag nuns, Angel. But I’m not joining and besides, at the bottom of the webpage it says “Go forth and sin some more!” See?” He passed the tablet over and stole the popcorn.

“Their founder’s name is Sister Vicious Power Hungry Bitch,” Darcy said. “I like her already. Next season?”

“Yeah!” he and Bucky said together.

At the end of the latest season, Bucky yawned. “Tired Buck?” Steve asked his long-time fella.
“Yeah, no idea why though.”

“You didn’t get much real sleep with… them,” Darcy said. “If you want to nap, go on, I have the watch and I’ll wake you for dinner, Jarvis had smoothie supplies delivered so I can make you something more food-like to eat.”

“M’kay,” Bucky said, yawning. “You’ve got the watch. Will anyone mind if I nap here, or should I go back to our room?”

“Either is fine, our room has more privacy, but here has the added benefit of being close enough to be in a maximum five point seven three second response time of anyone in shouting distance,” Steve said. He wanted Bucky to know the team would defend him. “We all watch each other’s six, so the family areas are all pretty close.”

“I don’t wanna move.”

“Okay,” Darcy said, kissing him gently. “You don’t have to. We got you.”

With Bucky snoring lightly under three blankets, Darcy and Steve took a moment to just hold each other, taking comfort in his safety. Then she guided him over to her more favored sofa for work and pulled out her laptop. “Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“We got him back.”

“You got him back, Angel. I’m just lucky the three of us are a package deal.”

“I could stop now; I could leave it at inconveniencing them and forget fighting. We could ask Matt to lobby for your back pay and buy a house and live like normal people. We could be happy like that, right?”

“Angel, I know you. You’re gonna be ninety four, and I’ll be a hundred and sixty four, and Buck will be a hundred and sixty five, and you’ll still want to fight. There’s always going to be a cause for you. I know that, and I made my peace with that back when I thought I was going to be geriatric when we finally met. And if Bucky can make his peace with my forever fight against bullies, he can make his peace with your need to right all the wrongs you can get your hands on. We are never gonna be normal people, Angel, and I think that’s the best thing ever. Can you imagine how utterly horrible living with me would be if I acted like those silly cartoons of me, all red-blooded American man who stands for Freedom and punches out Communists and is constantly saving my almost always blonde helpless dame? Those are terrible cartoons.”

Darcy laughed. “Yeah, for one, I don’t do helpless and I am not getting my hair bleached, so we’d have to contract out for that job, and I seem to remember you voted Socialist, so… it would be a bit hypocritical to punch Communists.” She looked at her screen. “Do you think we could get the team to go upstate or out somewhere with very few people to train for a week?”

“Why?” he asked. He’d learned sudden topic diversions usually meant her devious side was working.

“The second stage of Heracles Burn will work better if we’re not here. It’s a cyber-attack, and after trying and failing to kill Tony Stark, who do you think will be suspect number one?”

“Me,” Tony said behind them, but after they jumped a bit, he moved around to claim a chair. “But with the suit, I could still do a cyber-attack with Jarvis, even if I were stranded.”
“What about being wounded?” Clint said, coming in with Natasha. The two spies stood a little closer than before. “If we make it look like it sorta worked, and we’re taking you into hiding for recuperation, you can’t possibly be running as complex an attack as Scene Two. It’s a doozy.”

“How do I look sorta dead, Barton?” Tony challenged, but it was less anger and more snark, their trademark way of communicating.

“You don’t,” Loki said, following Thor. “I do.” He transformed his appearance into a replica of Tony, right down to the wrinkled Black Sabbath tee and the grease stain on his left knee. Slowly he added wear and tear, and a cut on his head that was followed by a bandage. “So long as you make no appearance,” he said in Tony’s voice, “I can maintain this charade for the time you require.”

“No if you talk like that,” Bruce called from the kitchen.

“He could be comatose,” Pepper said. “That’s the only time Tony isn’t actually capable of destroying things.”

“I’d claim slander, but she’s right,” Tony said.

“Ok,” Steve said, “Loki will be the Tony we just barely saved from a group of unknown assailants and we can give him to SHIELD’s medical team while the rest of us ‘track down leads’ somewhere that doesn’t have fame for its computer science. Can you trick the medical staff into thinking they are seeing what they should with Tony?” he asked Loki.

“Obviously,” Loki said with disdain.

“Good, Phil, can you manufacture a lead for us to follow in Montana or somewhere?”

“Yes, but it won’t sound good from me, should I pass it to Treasurer?”

“No,” Darcy said. “He’s risked a lot lately, give it to Triple-Threat to pass on to Bionic. It’s why we had them paired up, remember. He’s pretty good at the misinformation game.”

“On it. You do realize this means we’re going to have to go into headquarters and act offended, right?”

“I am offended you would even think I didn’t,” she replied coldly. “Sound good?” she asked everyone normally. The team laughed.

“Sure, sounds great, Angel. What about Bucky?”

“Hmm, Loki, can you slap the body guard look on someone else? I had you with me the entire time pre-press conference, it won’t look too odd if that you is still with me.”

“I can. It won’t work outside a certain range, but I am reasonably sure I can keep him looking that way the duration of the trip to the headquarters we retrieved Seidkonur Foster from.”

“Awesome, but today, we let Bucky nap. We’ll take unconscious Tony in tomorrow morning, saying we thought he was fine until he didn’t wake up. It’s not the best story, but… maybe it will fly.”

<B>

Bucky woke up to a smoothie, a tasty blended thing that vaguely reminded him of a milkshake, but not cold. He drank it while everyone else was eating various types of egg pie. Quiches, Jacques had
called them. Barton apparently made more than just cookies. After dinner, Steve went to wash dishes and Darcy filled him in on the plan. He was more than willing to put as much space between him and his former back-up as possible, especially as the one living captive was still trapped in a bathtub with special Stark brand duck tape. Not only wrapped in it from chest to thigh, but also with the top of the tub sealed off for three quarters of the length, so it was sit uncomfortably or drown in the tepid and filthy water he’d been in since Darcy didn’t like his answers. From what she told Bucky, she’d faked his death for him by dropping a blood caked vial of chemicals that used to be in his arm into the water too. It was kind of evil, really, but he had stopped caring.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
- Fleming- FitzSimmon's Code Name.
- Punk- 1930's and 40's slang for a femme looking gay man. Basically a twink.
- Cat's eye- a type of winged liner that is very dramatic.
- Stat- in this context, short for status, or status update.
- STAP- Sooner Than Actually Possible, a military acronym I love.
- svyataya mat' Bozhe- Holy Mother of God.
- glupaya devchonka- silly girl.
- Eleventh Hour- slang for the last possible moment, and sometimes the moment right after the last possible one.
- Wimple- the part of an old school nun's habit that went around the face, but under the veil. Traditionally white, with everything else black.
- Scene Two- code for the second stage of Heracles Burn.

Notes:
Brooklyn in the 1930's was known for it's drag cabarets, in which very sexy female appearing singers preformed, but all were assigned male at birth, and were usually cis-gender, but there were a few cases of possible trans performers, but the records are fuzzy because it was illegal to be trans. I modeled my idea of the performance after the scene from the pilot episode of Opposite Sex, only with Skinny Steve and a 1930's song. Look up the clip, it's amazing.

RuPaul, whose name does sound like Rue Paul, is a famous Drag Queen who has a popular reality show.

There are indeed Drag Nuns. They are called the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and they minister to the queer populations left feeling out of touch with their own faiths which condemn them. They began in the Castro district in 1977 chasing hateful anti-gay protesters. There website is http://www.thesisters.org/

Nuns in Catholic schools used to be allowed to strike children, usually on the hand with a ruler, as a punishment.

With Steve not technically dying, the Army does indeed owe him seventy-ish years of back pay, and with pay raises and automatic promotions based on time passed, it's probably a bundle. Someone did the math, but I can't find that info.

There is no teaser right now as I have literally just finished the work I am now posting and want to consult with another author about borrowing a character before I write the
next chapter.

OKAY! Time to play GUESS THAT CODE-NAME! There are three code-names without solid identification on who they are, although there are clues if you watched Season One of Agents of SHIELD. The names are Treasurer, Triple-Threat, and Bionic. Your clues are all in the work except one, Treasurer is one meaning of the actual name of that double agent. First person to guess each code-name's correct owner will win the right to demand a specific out-take scene for Out of Body Experience. (Exception, I am already working on Big Jim's ill-fated Craigslist encounter with Rumlow. Pick something else.)
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Darcy gets her Shadow Brother settled, her team collected, and everyone on the way.

Steve helps Bucky with food, bribes Bruce to keep his most embarrassing post-freeze propaganda under wraps and helps with escaped kids from child-care.

Bucky watches, notices, finds where he fits, hauls cookie thieves out into the light, and deals with a color based paranoia.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To ValkyriePhoenix, quadrad, SerialObsessor (DlStar71), iwanttoreadmore, Musicihowler, SoraSings, ElisaC, Selene_Aduial, Valkyriefromunderland, Shadows_of_Shemai, xSUPERGIRLx, SionnachOiche3, mouseymightymarvellous, Joey99, BloodElf, Beth_Mac and the 19 new kudo-ers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next day, Darcy, Natasha, Clint and surprisingly Pepper, went to work making everyone look bandaged and exhausted. Darcy and Nat handled bandaging things on people, their knowledge of how everyone fights giving them a more realistic view on what would have needed to be bandaged, had they really had to deal with an angry Winter Soldier. Clint and Pepper combined her years of experience seeing people in various states of unrested exhaustion and his fast hand with a make-up kit to give everyone a tired and drawn look.

Jane and Bruce directed the creation of a stretcher for Loki, their combined knowledge of re-purposing and the magic of duct tape building something that could carry the increased weight with no sign he wasn’t the same weight as Tony. It looked ready to fall apart at a moment’s notice, but it wouldn’t.

Tony came out dressed in a standard Stark Industries helicopter pilot’s uniform, complete with aviator sunglasses and a ball cap.

“Seriously?” Darcy asked him as she adjusted Phil’s sling.

“Nobody ever looks at the pilot. And yes, Robin Hood, I know you’re flying it, but I need an excuse to stay inside it.”

“Works for me,” Clint said as they got Loki on the stretcher between Steve and Thor.

“Agent Barton,” Loki said quietly, and Darcy was sure she only overheard because she was making sure Steve’s band-aid residue was clear enough. “I will be alone, surrounded by people who have every reason to hate me.” Clint nodded.
“I’ll put my best on it, I promise.”

They moved quickly, just as if they really did have a comatose Tony on the stretcher, and soon they were unloading on top of the Triskelion’s medical department. Darcy breezed past the security with Barton yelling at the top of his lungs for a medic beside her. It was actually pretty loud, even by her standards, which had been set by explosions and Thor, so she dropped back next to Natasha.

“Wow, does your man have a set of pipes,” she said under her breath, her lips barely moving.

“He took out his hearing aids, he’s profoundly deaf without them,” Natasha replied.

“Also,” Phil added from Nat’s other side, “Barton used to be a circus performer, he learned how to project his voice over a crowd as a child.”

“Good to know,” Darcy said. “I asked Fleming to meet us and got pointed back at you. Free up my people, dude.”

“I have no idea who Agent Fleming is. But I bet Fury does. I’ll get that taken care of.” He left and Nat peeled off to go with him. The buddy system was just a given.

Clint got ‘Tony’ checked in, and Steve used the excuse that Howard, rest his soul, would never forgive him to do the transfer into bed to hide how heavy Loki was and all the tiny bits of help he was giving Steve. Thor bellowed at the doctors and nurses that tried to check on the actually uninjured Avengers, and Darcy noticed his thick… call it an accent, got much thicker. To the point that when the group left medical, she nudged his side.

“Good fake-out, Lightning, our Shadow would be proud. Probably is, since I think they heard you in Hoboken, and he was a lot closer.”

“Just because my brother was gifted a silver tongue, does not mean that mine of lead is no use.”

“Duly noted.” She saw Clint leaning on a desk whispering with a non-Nat redhead and went to lean an arm on his bent shoulder. She caught his gaze and clumsily but emphatically finger spelled ‘break her heart, I break you’ at him.

“What? No, this is Ciara, I was just asking for a favor. You know, for Tony, since we’re off to Nevada without him.” He was still louder than normal, but it wasn’t the full room bellow.

“Oh, understood.”

“If it helps any, my boys call him Unca Clint. He’s one of the few people allowed to take care of them if I’m on mission more than 24 hours. It’s a short list.”

“Ah, sorry, I misread this situation, and he needed the shovel talk anyway. When you’re done here, just meet us in the caf, I’m pretty sure that’s where our bottomless pit team-mates are.”

Steve had left Loki’s room with Darcy, but when he saw her glaring at Clint before marching over, he tapped Bucky’s right elbow and jerked his head. Bucky nodded in his disguise, which was still unnerving and helped lead the way to the cafeteria.

“How’d you know?” Steve asked.

“You’re always hungry, Steve.”
“No, how’d you know where this was?”

“Oh, they gave me schematics to memorize once, we thought it would be useful so Darcy kept them. Do you have money?” He touched his stomach with a frown. “I’m starving.”

“Do not fear, friends,” Thor said. “The Lady Pepper has given me a card of credit, which she says may be used to buy what one needs. A most useful and thoughtful boon.”

“Fantastic,” Steve said. “Let’s get some of everything and then split so we can all try it.” He and Bucky each grabbed two trays and Thor followed suit as they methodically got one serving of everything. Steve put the mashed potatoes and gravy in front of Bucky along with a bowl of applesauce. “If you want to get back to real food, try starting soft. Bruce recommended it. I think he’s down in their science division getting something Jane requested.”

“I was,” Bruce said, sitting with his own sandwich and bag of chips. “And I’d start with the applesauce, it’s recommended for tender stomachs.”

Bucky ate a little, smiled and wound up finishing the bowl without looking up. “Oh, we were going to split. Sorry.”

“It’s not a problem, I’ve had it before and Thor can go get another if he wants to. Right, big guy?” he asked Thor, silently asking for help stopping Bucky from getting all guilty again.

“Oh indeed. And I am quite happy with this stroganoff made of beef. It is very hearty, would you like some, Captain?”

“No, thank you though, I know it sounds weird for a guy who knew food shortages his whole life, but I’m actually a bit of a picky eater, and I can tell from the color it won’t have enough sour cream in it.”

“When did you eat beef stroganoff, Steve?” Bruce asked him.

“Ashmyany, during the war, we did a fair bit of travel you know. Man, I tell you, nobody puts out a spread like an angry Byelorussian housewife whose town has been occupied by Nazis. We hid in one lady’s barn and she brought us all dinner. According to her daughter, Mrs. Medvedko cooked when angry.” Steve thought about it. “Actually, based on Tatiana’s use of a frying pan on a guy who wanted to get fresh, I’d say the whole family went for the cooking tools when they were angry. Good swing though.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“Oh, I’m just re-categorizing an entire life’s worth of data on you into the propaganda folder.”

“Oh, dear lord, tell me you didn’t watch the 1990 movie.”

“I was told to try to recreate you, by my girlfriend’s father, Steve. I watched everything. You went through a very embarrassing phase in the seventies. There spandex and a sculpted motorcycle helmet involved.”

“Kill me now.” Steve buried his face in his hands.

“I need pictures,” Bucky said. “For reasons.”
“Ok, but Reb Brown doesn’t pull off the spandex as well as Steve pulled off the tights in the original stuff.”

“Not those reasons. I heard about this thing called Photo Shop, and I have some hilarious ideas.”

“Bruce, I will literally punch General Ross in the jaw while in uniform and put the video on YouTube if you do not give him those pictures.”

“Sorry Bucky. You’re going to have to find someone else to do your seventies propaganda search, that’s the best offer ever.”

Bucky watched everything, very carefully. He’d been trained to. Longer than some people live, seeing what others didn’t dictated his survival, even if he chose not to remember most of it consciously. He noticed the tension in Natalia’s back as she followed her handler. He noticed the way Darcy circulated the group, checking in, making contact. He noticed Clint talking to a woman and Darcy interrupting. He noticed how Steve steered them away from a potential reprimanding to protect Clint’s dignity. He noticed how Bruce stepped up when he was nervous, and Steve and Thor worked to keep him from feeling guilty. He noticed how their smiles got more real when he looked broody. He doesn’t know how strong he is like this, Bucky realized. Bruce had no idea how strong a person had to be to look at that pain and try to ease it. None of them did. They were so strong, and it had nothing to do with super powers, or super suits or super serums. They were strong, because they helped others be strong. There was a tiny bit of Darcy in them, in that ability.

He may have been on auto pilot while he thought all this, but his auto pilot included proximity alarms which is why he reached down and pulled twin redheaded four year olds from under the table after one made the mistake of taking a cookie from Steve’s tray.

“Buck…,” Steve said warily, and Bucky cocked an eyebrow.

“You took a cookie that wasn’t yours,” he said solemnly to the one in blue. “That’s wrong. Steve was going to eat that.”

“But he got lots of food!” protested the one in green.

“Because he has to. If he doesn’t he faints.” The boys giggled and Steve frowned.

“I do not faint.”

“Fine, you swoon. Have a fit of the vapors, call it what you will. He still needs to eat or I gotta carry all that.” The boys looked at Steve, who had stood for a better glaring position. And they looked up, and up.

“He’s a giant,” said the green one in awe. The blue one offered back the cookie, only slightly nibbled.

“I’m going to go buy them each a cookie that’s their own,” Steve said after accepting the nibbled white chocolate and macadamia cookie. “Do you know anyone who could help me pick the best one?” he asked the boys seriously before taking them to the counter to buy them a cookie each with the card Thor handed him.

The redhead from earlier came in with Clint and Darcy and scooped the boys up to take away.
Clint sat backwards on a chair and stole the curly fries and Darcy slid the hummus to Bucky and showed him how to use the flat bread to eat it. He ate cautiously but it felt okay, until suddenly he was too full. Darcy noticed that and took the rest of the hummus to eat herself.

Natalia and Phil arrived and they all went back up to the helo-pad where Tony flew them back to the tower to change transportation.

Darcy squealed when she saw two skinny kids by a Jane’s RV in the garage. He picked up her discarded go bag and watched her meet old friends for the first time. After loading luggage into several vehicles, Darcy hopped in the RV and called out to Bucky.

“You get shotgun, Jane needs the back and we both know Steve is shit with directions.”

It seemed they were finally off. Although Bucky noticed a van joining them on the highway after a pit stop.

“We have a tail.”

“I invited that tail. I want Red out of the shit storm zone too. It’s cool.”

“Got it, just checking.”

“Uh-huh. Hi, I’m Paranoia Girl, have you met me? I know an inner freak out when I see it.”

“Not a lot of good memories of that color, Dollface. Red blood, red skulls, red rooms, it’s… hard not to think of Red as a threat.”

“Red lips,” she countered. “Steve blushing red right from the tips of his ears down to his nipples. Sexy red lingerie. There are good red things too.”

“Red lingerie?”

She pulled her tee shirt to one side, exposing a strip of cherry bright satin. “Play nice with the others and I’ll let you play naughty with the red lingerie.”

“You drive a hard bargain. Deal.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Triskelion- the name of the SHIELD HQ in CA:WS.
Pipes- vocal chords, used to indicate loudness.
Buddy system- the rule of nobody ever going anywhere alone, a safety measure.
Caf- short for Cafeteria.
Boon- favor.
Auto-pilot- doing things without thinking to hard about them, usually because you are thinking of something else.
Swoon, have a fit of the vapors- both old terms for fainting associated with women.
Shotgun- the front passenger seat.
Tail- someone following you.

Notes:
Clint is a make-up artist in this for two reasons, one, he was in the circus and probably learned there, and two, Jeremy Renner who plays him was a make-up artist for a while.

Re-purposing one thing into a new thing is a very useful skill on a budget, and especially since Jane and Bruce are shown in canon to have done this to make their science equipment, I figured they would be able to do this.

Steve has super fast healing, so bandaging him would be pointless, but showing that he USED to have a band-aid with the grey residue leaves the impression he was hurt, even if he isn't now.

In the comics, Clint is profoundly deaf. They give multiple reasons and ret-cons for it, but he's always disabled in the comics canon even if it doesn't get brought up, unless the ret-con set him back to normal-hearing, when you can expect him to get deafened again.

Soft foods are recommended for people transitioning onto regular food from a liquid diet. Bananas, soft rice, and applesauce are in the top easiest foods.

There are many recipes for beef stroganoff, and the one I (and because I'm an egotist, Steve) prefer is heavy on the sauce and much paler than most recipes. I understand it's a Belarus/Polish variant, so I brought in Asmyany, where Dugan shows he knows the terrain in the Agent Carter TV show.

As bad as the 1990 Captain America movie was, nothing will ever beat Reb Brown in a patriotic Evel Knievel suit with sculpted wings on the helmet for embarrassingly tacky renditions of Cap. I'm head-canoning the bad writing and strong political slant into movies set entirely in WWII for this story.

Teaser:

“I can feel you checking out my ass Steve, get in here before I change my mind.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Darcy takes notes on her team, works around Bucky's over-protective nature, and lets Steve unwrap a present they all enjoy.

Steve takes care of his loves, and has some amazing sex.

Bucky worries, waits, and is rewarded for his patience.

Chapter Notes


A WARNING: November has begun, so much of my writing will be NaNoWriMo related, and not this. Do NOT expect my regular posting to continue being so regular until December.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy pulled them off the road in Oklahoma to sleep for the night, and after circling the vans like wagons in the camp-site she’d paid for in cash, making sure everybody had beds or sleeping bags and checking on the fire Bruce built, she hauled out a cooler of hot-dogs and marshmallows.

It was interesting, she noted, how everyone did their roasting a little differently. Bruce stuck his hot-dog right into the fire, almost touching the coals. He’s killing any germs that might be there, she thought to herself when the normally meticulous scientist set a charred stick of former meat in his bun. He wasn’t always guaranteed safe food, she realized. He’d been on the run long enough to develop habits to keep him safe. Clint was nearly a total polar opposite, warming his dog at the top of the flame rather than actually cooking it. Briefly she wondered how many times he ate uncooked food that he got used to the possible toxins or germs. Tony handled the stick with meticulous care, far more invested in making it perfect than she’d ever seen him with anything other than his machines. The way Pepper kissed his cheek when he passed the hot-dog to her explained a lot, he was learning, for her. It was sweet, as was Jane lecturing Thor on proper roasting for her preferred style. Bucky put his metal arm conspicuously between the new brunette and Darcy and Steve, and Phil was fairly focused on making sure everyone had what they needed. Steve caught her rolling her eyes at Bucky’s back.

“So I don’t think we were introduced, Miss…?”

“Skye, just Skye, I absolutely hate my last name. It’s nice to meet you. Officially, I mean I did work with those two on your brain wave patterns,” she said indicating Jemma Simmons and Leo Fitz,
currently debating the exact temperature at which to eat a roasted marshmallow and not noticing the cinder that was the first try still in the fire. “So I kind of know you, because I saw that, and they said some stuff about what it meant, but I don’t really know you, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. Darcy talks about you, so I feel I know you, but well.” He shrugged.

“Totally,” she agreed. “IRL is so different from internet. Uh, IRL stands for-”

“In real life, I was under arctic ice, not a rock. Besides, we had pen pals. It’s not as new as you think.” He looked at Bucky, then at Darcy. “Apparently, a lot of things are not as new as you think. Lay off the jealousy, Jerk. You used to actually be good with women, you know, when did I get that job?”

“Yelena,” Darcy answered and smirked at Natasha across the fire as her boyfriends stared.

“Chertov Yelena,” the red head said automatically.


“The other Black Widow,” Natasha said. “’The ‘loyal’ one.” It was sort of bizzare watching Natasha do air quotes, but Darcy couldn’t disagree. Lena had betrayed all of them, despite all efforts to help her. But she gave blind loyalty to Russia, to the Red Room.

“Oh, bondage Barbie, I remember her, yeesh, that was a crazy one,” Clint said. Darcy snorted her bottle of water and coughed.

“I cannot believe you called Lena that, oh god, that’s too priceless.”

“She was blonde, improbably proportioned, and dressed head to toe in black leather, it was a reasonable nickname.”

“Not arguing, just disappointed I didn’t get to see you call her that to her face. But yeah, Lena was a real piece of work and totally destroyed any ability for either of us to see a woman first and a threat second, which I am still mad at you for,” she told Bucky. “I should have gotten that lesson into you before the goddamn war, but no, it takes a hot blonde sociopathic Russian assassin to do it. I should never have let you watch James Bond. Nerd.”

Bucky shrugged, not denying it, but he did ease off the edge he’d held. Darcy and Phil wordlessly divided up the campers and make sure that they had actually eaten more than marshmallows and got them into sleeping arrangements.

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Steve didn’t say anything as he watched her get everyone settled. He didn’t need to, he knew this was part of who she was, as much as the fighting, as much as her smarts, she cared for people. She always had. He nudged Bucky and lead him to the RV, where he unloaded the tent and air mattress Tony had got them, since the RV only slept two.

One hour, seventeen minutes and five more entries into the swear jar later, the tent was up, the air mattress inflated, and all three sleeping bags unzipped and laid out like blankets. Darcy joined them, having gotten even the most stubborn sleepers in bed, although she was muttering darkly about Tony and a hidden vodka flask.

“So, red lingerie?” Steve asked with one eyebrow raised.
“Bucky told you.”

“He may have. He’s in there wondering if the cold shoulder he gave Skye means he won’t get to see it.” Knowing full well Bucky could hear them, he grinned at her. “What do you think?”

“I think you were a very nice boy tonight, and everyone knows the nice boys get to unwrap their presents. It’s not really Christmas, but I think that holds true here. If you want to share, that’s up to you.”

“Well, they do say sharing is the nice thing to do, and I like unwrapping presents,” he smiled on the edge of a leer and unzipped the tent for her. He took a moment to appreciate her backside as she crawled in.

“I can feel you checking out my ass Steve, get in here before I change my mind.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He followed her into the tent, where the inflated queen sized luxury mattress had been fitted with sheets. Kicking off his shoes, he climbed in beside her, with Bucky watching hungrily as he pulled her shirt off slowly, pausing to kiss her skin as he bared it. By the time it was off and her bright cherry red satin bra was available to see, Bucky was visibly hard under his sleep pants and from the wicked smirk Darcy sported, she had seen it, and she knew why.

Steve took his time, pulling down the straps to kiss the lightly imprinted skin where they had been, fiddling with the bow that covered the front clasp before opening it, gently easing the cups of the bra off of her breasts so they wouldn’t pull or bounce unpleasantly for her. Looking at Darcy bared to him, to them, like this sent a thrill of excitement through him. He dipped his head low to catch one nipple in his mouth, playing with it until Darcy grabbed at his hair to pull him away from the over-stimulated flesh.

“I guess I did say I would share, didn’t I, Angel? And I was giving all the attention to one side. That wasn’t very fair of me.” She smiled at him and moved her hips, making him acutely aware of what his placement of one knee between her legs had put him near. “Buck, I think the lady could use a hand up top while I get to work down here.” Bucky slid into place to kiss and lick and stroke the other breast as Steve unbuttoned her jeans and pulled them off to see a pair of soaked cherry red satin panties. Oh Lord, he had no idea why he’d been blessed with this amazing woman, but anything he could do to satisfy her every need, he’d do.

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Bucky had been filled with worry as Darcy drifted off with Skye, which was a much easier name. Red was danger and pain and captivity, but skies were freedom. He knew he’d been rude. His own mother, had she been alive and present would have smacked his head for the way he’d treated the young woman. And Darcy had been specific. He was supposed to be nice around everyone. As much as he had teased Steve about spoiling the relationship with his awkwardness back in the War, now it was him who might have ruined things.

He got the bed ready for three people who really hated the cold, and tried to believe she’d forgive him. Steve had noticed when they got done and said something as Bucky mechanically dressed for bed. The whole embarrassing story came out. Steve had held him and kissed him and brushed the hair he hid behind out of his face. Then he went out to talk with Darcy. The conversation made Bucky’s face heat, the idea of unwrapping a warm, willing Darcy like a present filling his mind until everything else was gone. When she came in it was hard not to reach for her, but she’d been clear. He knew the rules.
Steve unwrapped her slowly. He’d always unwrapped things slowly, carefully, saving the paper or the ribbon or even the twine off a postal package on the front. When Steve’s mouth went to her breast and her face shifted into pure bliss Bucky bit his lip to keep from begging to touch her, to help bring that look to her face. He wanted to, oh how he wanted, but even with all the memories he had saved with Darcy, there were too many instincts against asking for anything.

When Steve offered him her other breast, he looked to Darcy and the hunger in her eyes as she nodded. It had been a really long time, even ignoring the cryo-freeze, since he’d done this, but some skills you can never forget. For him, this was one. He worked her higher and higher as Steve did something she greatly enjoyed down between her legs until she let out a muffled cry and bucked wildly. He turned to Steve, who was licking his fingers clean.

“Want some?” Steve offered, and he did not need to ask twice. Bucky eagerly lapped at the musky juices and sucked on Steve’s fingers like it was something else entirely. His hands flew to Steve’s fly and soon he was sucking there, swallowing his lover’s cock back until he was close to gagging, then pulling back with suction, swirling his tongue around the tip, over and over until Steve spilled his pleasure into Bucky’s mouth with a quiet moan. After swallowing, he looked back at Darcy, who was looking at them wide-eyed and hungry.

“I… I need,” she trailed off, seeming unable to form a sentence.

“I can’t right now,” Steve said apologetically as he changed pants.

“Bucky,” she said, somewhere on the edge of a moan and a demand.

He certainly wasn’t going to tell her no. He let Steve pull down his soft sleep pants and roll on a rubber, as Darcy scooted back to make room for him between her legs. Plunging into her was like a pleasurable version of the wipes, his brain went blank of any and all thought aside from doing as she said, faster or slower, and every inch of his body tingled with pleasure. He finished as she clamped down hard on him with a short, low growl of “Darcy,” before Steve was catching him and helping him lay back bonelessly on the air mattress. Darcy, still naked, curled into him and Steve wrapped around her back and pulled up the covers. Sleep came hard and swift, and he didn’t dream.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Chertov- fucking, used as a curse-word.
Cold shoulder- to be dismissive and cold towards someone without being overtly mean.

Notes:
The way people cook food really can tell you a lot, especially if you have any psychology training, which Darcy has a fair amount of from time spent with Bucky, as knowing a person better can get you closer, and therefore open windows of opportunity. It came from a crappy place, but Darcy will use this for good.

Yelena Belova was a second product of the Red Room's Black Widow project, only she never defected and hates Natasha for her perceived betrayal. She is indeed blonde, improbably proportioned, and when not undercover, dresses head to toe in black leather.

James Bond is a fictional spy who has had many romantic encounters with hot Russian spies, who usually try to kill him.
Assembling a modern tent can be very easy, if you've done it a lot, I know people who can get a three person tent up in fifteen minutes with no problem. However it is a very particular skill, and if you don't have it, it's going to wind up like trying to re-fold the road map or untangle Christmas lights.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Darcy has a scare, eavesdrops on Bucky and Skye, and trolls Bucky about hair braiding.

Steve goes for a run, meets a man, and trolls Darcy to Tony's disgust/amusement.

Bucky goes to have an overdue chat with Skye, gets therapy, and starts expanding the family.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To ValkyriePhoenix, quadrad, Sergeant_Disaster, SerialObsessor (DlStar71), Musicowler, Notashamed, SoraSings, Valkyriefromunderland, Shadows_of_Shemai, Jade01, Beth_Mac, rosiedeplume, BloodElf, SionnachOiche3, Selene_Aduial, Joey99, TeaAndTricks and the 11 new kudo-ers.

I know not all of you are in America, and those that are may have strong opinions I don't want to fight about, but today is election day and I'm fucking terrified. So red state or blue state, please put good thoughts towards my state of mind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy woke up pleasantly sore and mildly irritated at the tweeting, chirping birds. She could tell by the light that the sun wasn’t really up, and if the sun wasn’t up, neither should she be, she thought. Rolling over to cuddle Bucky, she realized he wasn’t there. Sitting up in a panic woke Steve.

“Angel?”

“Bucky’s not here,” she whispered, her voice barely making a sound.

“He’s an early riser, and he took breakfast watch most nights. He may have gone to get things ready,” Steve told her, but his voice was unsure.

“I’ll check the camp; you do a run of the perimeter?”

“Good plan.” Steve kissed her, pulled a jacket over his pajama top and crammed his feet back in shoes he hadn’t unlaced the night before. Before she could retrieve a clean bra, he was out of the tent. She had a lot of the skills of a soldier, from shooting and navigating rough terrain, to planning attacks and assessing threats. She’d had to, it was learn or die and take a man she loved with her. Getting dressed quickly, however, was not one of those skills. That she had gotten as Jane’s intern, when her boss noticed a nifty sky thing and she had to be in the driver’s seat before Jane could go hareing off without any back-up. It wasn’t quite as speedy as Steve, but decent.

Jamming a knit hat over her hair she stepped out and scanned the camp. As expected from the lack of scolding, Bucky was not, in fact setting up breakfast. Her heart beat loud in her ears as she
checked each tent and the RV and Tony’s van. Tony was awake already and offered to hijack her a satellite for a quick heat scan, but she turned him down. He did suit up, though and after making sure he’d gotten six solid hours of sleep and confirming with both Pepper and Jarvis, Darcy let him go up for a quick fly over. She and Pepper shared an amused glance and the red and gold armor and Darcy had a horrible thought.

She raced to the beat up van closest to the entrance to the park. A bad enough nightmare and Bucky might not even know what he was doing, why he was so sure Skye was a threat, he’d just react. Badly. Her heart came to a sudden short stop when she saw the door cracked open on Skye’s mobile lab area. That turned out to be a good thing when it drew her to enough of a halt to hear voices.

“So that’s why I was such a major jerk. It’s not an excuse, but I thought you should know it wasn’t you, it was completely me and my mush for brains,” Bucky said around a mouthful of something, Darcy could hear the crunching sounds.

“Eeeen,” Skye replied with a game show buzzer sound. “It wasn’t you at all, it was those no good, two bit, Nazi hacks trying to rewire a system they had no idea how to operate as end users let alone programmers. You see, brains are just very complex computers, when you think about it. Your brain, my brain, all brains, they’re like the CPU of the whole body. And they act as memory back-ups and they handle logic gate problems for you so you can make choices faster, I mean, I hate a ton of things about how human beings were designed, but God is a very talented wetware designer. And humans, I mean we aren’t anywhere close to figuring out how all it works. Trying to reprogram an advanced wetware system, that was moronic in the extreme. Brainwashing, it’s basically all just downloading a shit-ton of malware into the system so you can make it do this one thing it wasn’t meant to. They made a bug, called it a feature, and foisted all the blame on you for the shit they broke doing it. Not your fault, man.”

“Thanks Skye. Where’d you get so good at saying all the right stuff? I feel like I’m always messing up Steve and Darcy’s life with my stupid mouth.”

“Hey, my friend really likes that mouth, stop talking shit, got it? And it’s kinda hard not to learn how to say the stuff that will calm someone down when they’re upset when you grow up like I did. Catholic orphanage.”

“ Seems you’d learn how to condemn or keep quiet, place like that. Unless they changed.”

“Can’t say much for the nuns, honestly, but when I was six, this blind kid was brought in. Older than me, he had a dad and a mom, even if she wasn’t around he knew she was real, but then the dad died and the mom never picked him up. He was a wreck, I tell you, and I wanted to hate him for it. I’d never had parents, not once, the orphanage was all I knew as a home. He at least had something for longer than I’d been around. I was so angry, I was screaming inside while I kept quiet and condemned. Then he walks up after school and he has this big bruise, all on his face. He said he fell, but I knew a kiss with a fist when I saw one. Had enough myself. But he sits down right next to me and he just breathes. And I see every inch of his stress and pain dropping away. It pissed me off so I was gonna grab him, scare him, you know?”

“A blind kid?”

“I was seven, I was a bit of a dick, okay? But the weirdest thing happened. I reach out and he grabs my hand. Holds it. And now I’m standing there looking like a dork with him holding my hand. But he gets up and he hugs me, and says thank you. So I demand what for. Turns out his hearing got way better after he lost his sight and my heartbeat was the loudest, the easiest to find. As long as I was there, Matty knew he wasn’t alone, there was somebody else, even if she was always angry. It’s
what I needed to hear. That I wasn’t alone, that I was wanted. Matty was like that big brother I never asked for, and he, he was the one who taught me this stuff, the tells so I know what people need. He always said I was better at it since I didn’t need bat ears to cheat with.”

“Your brother sounds swell.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure if he’s still my brother. I sort of… ran off. I wanted to find the truth about my parents, so I put probably dead people before him the moment this group said they wanted me to join. I wasn’t even seventeen when I deleted everything there was on who I was, including the home we shared, and created Skye. Some things… you don’t get forgiveness for.”

“If he was ever your brother Skye, he will forgive you.”

“How do you know?” Darcy could hear the aggression that hid pain.

“I was a big brother too. My sister might be dead, it’s been so long, but I don’t care if she became a mob moll or changed her name or decided to pretend I never existed, I would still love her. I’d give just about anything if I could talk to Becks one more time. Trust me, big brothers will forgive little sisters anything, with a token amount of groveling, it is our duty to torment you too, you know.”

“Oh I know. Matty was a little troll. He’d take the hit instead of me though. I miss him.”

“You do realize you can probably look him up,” Darcy said, opening the van door a bit more to see Bucky and Skye in pajamas and braids on her bed eating dry Froot Loops. “And I did bring milk, bowls, and spoons too,” she added with a pointed look at the not at all balanced breakfast.

“Dollface, this isn’t what it looks like,” Bucky said, hands up in a calming gesture.

“I dunno, looks like you snuck out on me and Steve to get therapy from my main hacktivist and from the looks of things, let her braid your hair. I had dibs on that hair. You totally hair-cheated.”

“Um, is that really a thing now?” he asked looking worried. Darcy and Skye lost it.

“No,” Skye gasped between laughs. “It’s not a thing.”

“I have no intention of telling you what to do with your hair or your body, Bucky,” Darcy rolled her eyes. “Seriously, after all we went through you think I’m going to be that bossy and possessive? Never going to happen.”

“Not what you said last night, Angel,” Steve said behind her.

“Way too much information, even for me,” Stark said from the air.

“Wow,” Darcy said dryly, “I guess when the king of hedonism tells you you’ve crossed a line, you know the actual sin line is five miles behind you.”

“And don’t you forget it,” Tony said. “Ooh, Froot Loops, can I have some?"

And, just like that, everyone got up and prepared breakfast and the caravan moved out again as the sun finally really rose behind them.

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strangely, considering the only time he’d been in woods he’d been fighting a war, but he liked the mix up of flat running and avoiding trees. Of course, the one time he didn’t avoid a tree root, he fell on his face in front of a small house and the guy on the porch laughed and called him a stupid white man in Choctaw.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m an idiot,” he replied in the same language as he stood up. He’d been friends with a few of the code-talkers and picked up a few things. “But it’s because I’m from a city, not because I’m white.”

“You speak Choctaw?” the man asked in English.

“Only enough to get me through a war, sir.”

“We haven’t had code-talkers since the second…”

“I know,” Steve smiled his Captain America smile. “I should get back or my dame’s gonna kill me. Be a damn shame to survive Nazis and aliens, and die at the hands of my girlfriend, can you see the headstone? Here lies Steve Rogers, War Hero, Avenger, and Total Dumbass.” He left as the guy was cackling.

He got back to find Darcy teasing Bucky and felt it was only fair to tease her in return, since Bucky was bright red, sputtering, and wearing a French braid. He was in no place to defend himself. Tony getting in on the action just made the morning better.

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Bucky had thought his impulsive, early morning trip to ramble out an apology would end badly, but Skye was a pretty great person. She’d invited him into her van, which was obviously her home, too, braided his hair while he spilled his guts about a bunch of stuff that had nothing to do with her, but he felt better talking about it. When he finally got around to how upset he was by the color red, even the word, she’d shared her sugary cereal and told him it wasn’t his fault. When he told her that her brother would forgive her, he wasn’t blowing air; she was so much like Rebecca that it almost hurt. He couldn’t imagine any brother not forgiving her.

Later, in the RV with Darcy, he asked to borrow her phone to text Skye. It took him two state lines to get it right, but Darcy was helpful about it. He was sure she’d overheard enough to know the kind of big brother buttons Skye pressed in his head. And hey, she adopted two brothers, that meant he got to have a sister, right?

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Breakfast watch- sometimes called morning watch or last watch, this person starts breakfast.
CPU- Central Processing Unit, the 'brain' of a computer system.
Logic gate- a code that performs a logical operation on one or more logical inputs, and produces a single logical output. In effect, you see the symbol for poison, you make a logical deduction it would be dumb to consume the contents, you do not eat poison.
Wetware- biological computing systems, like brains.
Malware- code designed to damage or sabotage the code it is inserted into.
Kiss with a fist- slang for a punch or the bruise left by a punch.
Mob moll- the girlfriend or wife of a Mafia member.
Hacktivist- Skye calls her group of socially motivated hackers this. It's a Hacker-Activist.
Blowing air- saying something you don't mean.

Notes:
There are many ways and reasons a person learns to get dressed quickly, but many rely on muscle memory, which is why Darcy doesn't have Steve's speed here, her needs allowed for a little more slowness than his.

One of many possible symptoms of PTSD is disassociative action. In this state people move and act, but are not consciously controlling your actions and when they come out, may strongly regret what was done in a state of disassociation. Disassociation actions are normally born of subconscious fears or desires.

Skye is using a very apt computer metaphor. Most brainwashing methods operate by breaking a person down and rebuilding them the way you want them. Humans are nowhere near close to knowing how to do this without massive psychological damage and trauma.

My family has quite a lot of Choctaw humor and tradition in it, this is exactly how a friendly interaction would go in this circumstance, and the headstone joke is right up the alley humor wise.

You'll hear a lot about Navajo Code-Talkers, but the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes had a fair number too in WWII. Choctaw and Chickasaw (which are super similar, being brother languages) are very hard to decode, because they use a cultural-linguistic schema unlike anything in Europe. Also, sometimes Code-Talkers would troll the spies by acting super secret and serious about weather and farming small talk, then guffawing their way through critical troop orders. We do enjoy pulling one over on stupid white people.

Teaser:

"You’d be amazed exactly how advanced the ‘advanced interrogation’ methods can be in a cave in a desert."
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Darcy herds cats, talks about trust, and tries her best to help her people.

Steve talks to Tony, hears some history he hadn't known, and takes Tony on a Firefly Run.

Bucky helps with the infrastructure of the base, talks to Clint, and feels out his place.

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy was beat by the time they made it to Nevada. Herding cats might be easier than managing this bunch. She asked Skye to put the bug zapper in the safe house, and abandoned looking bunker.

“Why is this even here?” she asked Coulson, incredibly envious of his unrumpled, fully rested appearance.

“When the nuclear proliferation bans were put in place, America had to… divest a few accounts that had been missed in the books. They couldn’t exactly get rid of them the ordinary way, so they did what most people do with skeletons in closets.”

“They locked them up, buried the safe, and tossed the key in the ocean.” A thought hit her. “And they built a bunker that could theoretically just be a backup for training in dessert environments right on top of the buried safe.”

“Yes, that’s the gist,” he said calmly as Bruce looked a little green, and not in a Hulk way.

“Are you sure I should be here? My last experience with radiation did not go so well.”

“I trust you, Bruce, and I trust Hulk,” Darcy said, cutting off his protest with a hand. “You never looked at the salvaged security footage I had Jarvis save for you. He’s a sweet seven-year-old little boy, who happens to be bigger than Shaq, green, and with a slightly larger radius of destruction for his temper tantrums than average. But the question now is, do you trust Phil? If he says it’s safe, I’m willing to accept that, but if you aren’t, I will put us in route to Reno and make Tony get us rooms.”

Bruce looked at her with a confused face. “People… they just aren’t like this. They don’t just accept that the guy who irradiated himself can be trusted around radioactive material, and they
certainly don’t say they trust Hulk. He’s a monster.”

“Oi!” Jane called out. “No smack talking my friend, Bruce. I happen to like Hulk, there are a limited number of people on the planet that enjoy it when I ramble at them about stars and quarks and break into spontaneous educational songs. And besides, of course people aren’t like this, people are horrible,” she said with an air of total logic. “Darcy’s not a people, she’s a person, who is not horrible, and persons are way better than people.”

“We’re all special little snowflakes, Brucie-bear,” Tony added, “and there is no ambient radiation above the average for air in this zone. I scanned it before agreeing to come out here, certain forms of radiation react badly with the reactor core. Why do you think I’m actively trying to out-compete nuclear power plants? A few more Chernobyl’s and my heart gets shredded by an exploding electromagnet before the shrapnel ever gets a chance to kill me.”

“I… guess this is ok,” Bruce said unsurely.

“Dudes, you guys gotta come see this! It’s like something out of a video game!” Skye yelled from inside.

“Coming!” Bucky yelled back and lifted all three of the triad’s go bags on his metal arm. “See you inside Doll, my sis is calling.”

Darcy rolled her eyes and started herding everyone inside.

Steve looked at the concrete walls and decided they’d do. They were under at least ten feet of dirt, steel mesh, and ballistic resistant Stark Industries anti-radiation concrete. And that was just the top floor. They’d be safe here from anything short of a nuclear winter, which would only be a problem when the massive stock-pile of preserved food ran out, and with six people on the team with extensive knowledge of stretching out food, they’d die of old age before that happened.

He glanced at Tony expecting to see the genius complaining about not getting signal yet, or how out dated the fixtures were. Instead he saw the look he’d seen on the green-bean troopers. White knuckles, no expression, tense body lines. His shoulders were straight. They were never straight around the team. Even with Darcy’s recruits, he’d been leaning, shifted contra posture, slumped, hunched, a dozen positions and shapes Steve recalled perfectly. He’d only ever stood like this when he was around someone he didn’t trust.

“Tony,” Steve asked quietly, not surprised he startled the billionaire, but certainly amazed at how quiet and small the start was. “What’s wrong?”

“I ever tell you how I became Iron Man?”

“No, Darcy told me about the suit, the thing in LA, your work in war torn areas taking out Stark Industries weapons, but how you got to that point… even your file was sketchy. And yes, they gave me your file, they wanted me in the command slot on the team.” He rolled his eyes at that. He was not the guy they all seemed to think he was. He’d never been the leader, not even of the Howlies. Each of his teammates had a unique skill set, and he did have a knack for deploying them effectively, but every single Howlie, even the reserves like Happy Sam that people forgot, also knew how to lead. Every Howlie knew every other Howlie’s abilities and half the time all he ever did was state a target and let them go where they needed.

“I was kidnapped. Terrorists, called the Ten Rings. They held me in a cave. Put the magnet in my
chest to keep me alive to build them weapons. When I said no, they… hurt me. You’d be amazed exactly how advanced the ‘advanced interrogation’ methods can be in a cave in a desert. I built the mark two because I needed to know if it was a fluke. I built the mark three because I made a promise to a dying man. I have the mark seven because the past keeps trying to kill me and the only way I feel safe is to stay ahead. I’m a futurist out of fear and need.” He looked at Steve, his brown eyes blown with fear into near complete black. “But I built the mark one to get out of a cave.”

“Do you need us to find somewhere else? I’m sure Coulson didn’t know how you’d react to this, or we wouldn’t be here.”

“No, I don’t want to hold the team back, I know I need to stay low so Loki stays safe and we make those Hydra bastards pay. I can tough it out.”

“Can doesn’t mean should Tony.”

“A lot of people tell me that, usually I have a revolutionary bit of tech a few days later.”

“I’m not talking about building Skynet, Tony. You obviously taught Jarvis very good manners and he would never try to take over the world. I’m talking about suffering. You are not holding us back by needing things. What do you need?”

“Sky,” he said softly. “I need to see sky.”

“Yeah, what’tcha need me for, Mr. Stark?” Skye said, bounding over at the sound of her name. Tony flinched.

“Wrong sky, kiddo,” Steve told her. “Darcy! I need to take Tony on a Firefly Run.”

“Got it, take water, we’re not technically in Death Valley, but it still gets up over ninety out there. If you aren’t back in an hour, I’m going looking for you and there had better be a damn good reason I had to sweat, Steven Grant Rogers.”

“I got it Angel. We’ll be careful.”

Outside, Tony relaxed, seeming to melt. His breathing leveled out and his posture went back to its default flop. “So what’s a Firefly Run? I highly doubt there are any bioluminescent bugs out here, and I know there are no space ships. I run scans.”

“You do?”

“I almost got a SETI award when I was eighteen, messing with frequency junk. But I only got a partial before I lost it, so it didn’t count. But I’m sure there are aliens, non-Asgard aliens with ships, so I keep an electronic eye out for them. Half of NASA’s private donation funding is me in various aliases so they won’t realize one person is keeping the space program from dying. I don’t want them feeling obligated.”

“That’s neat, I didn’t know that. I knew about the moon, Darcy showed me that one. Stops my breath every time, you know. Just that, what my time called science fiction, this time calls history.”

“Remind me to dig up some of my old filk records for you some time, I think you’d like Fire in the Sky and The Ballad of Apollo Thirteen.”

“Yeah, that reminds me, I meant to ask, what was the song you had going in Stuttgart? I liked it.”

“You liked Shoot to Thrill? Man, I gotta tell Dad you’re into AC/DC. He and I disagreed on a lot
of my favorite music.”

“That’s because your Dad actually knew how to dance. I don’t, and so music wasn’t my favorite. Then-music, I always liked Darcy’s music. I could dance to that, the videos showed the basics of doing that alone, and Darcy doesn’t have asthma.”

“That tracks, I guess. But you still never told me what a Firefly Run was.”

“Oh, well, in the War, sometimes a fella’d start to get a little hot under the collar. Too many orders, too many horrors, too many chains you can’t see but sure can feel. You let them run hot too long and they end up shooting their foot to get free. If you’re lucky.”

“If you aren’t?”

“It’s better not to think about what happened to the squads that ran a soldier hot and weren’t lucky. To make it short, Howlies called those cases Reaver hits. It was just known without saying, you never reported up what happened or who had been run hot. There was no reason to hurt the families, who wouldn’t understand it, or to slander a man who had a very bad but totally natural reaction to the worst of mankind. We all knew that but for the grace ‘a God and in the case of the Howlies, Darcy, it could have been us.”

“Christ.”

“Yeah. So, in keeping with the theme Darcy set by naming the unlucky ones ‘Reaver hits’, we started Firefly Runs. A chance for someone running too hot, pushing hard burn, to get out and away. To feel free, for a while. ‘I’m still free, you can’t take the sky from me’ you know? And it’s not going AWOL if your commander goes too, or sends someone with you to catch if you need to crack, or defend you if the enemy found you on a Firefly. Nobody who needs a Firefly is in any emotional shape to fight.”

“You seriously did this, back in World War Two? I thought that was all ‘walk it off, rub some dirt in it, stop whining.’ PTSD didn’t become a thing until later. As a diagnosis.”

“If Howard weren’t elderly I’d slap him one. Just because he was constantly high on adrenaline and booze and only ever needed a Firefly once the whole time I knew him doesn’t mean the rest of us weren’t invested in keeping our friends from losing it. Never leaving a man behind means his mind and soul as well as his body. I don’t know how other units handled it, but the 107th took care of our own. Darcy, Bucky and I still do,” he said passing Tony another bottle. “If we make sure you get plenty of Firefly Runs, do you think the Bunker is still going to cause problems?”

“Maybe. If we’re out here most of the time, training or whatever, or if I can get a good work set-up. I hardly ever notice the basement in Malibu, but that’s because I only go down there to work.”

“We’ll see what we can do. You get enough sky?”

“Yeah, it’s hot out here. Have I mentioned I hate deserts?”

Bucky helped Skye redo the technical set up. It was a far cry from cars and rifles and even the old radio he’d fixed for a fast dollar once. But he could follow her instructions and carry heavy things. Her bossiness was just like Rebecca, he thought, a pang of old but new loss going through him. He pushed it down to help her, but noted he’d have to tell Darcy about it later. She knew lots of tricks for this sort of thing.
When Skye declared the computers workable, barely, they moved on to helping Thor and Phil and Clint get the sleeping areas set up. Nobody wanted a bunk scenario, so small offices were being pressed into service as bedrooms, their desks being moved to walls and beds from the barracks rooms were moved in. When Bucky frowned at the tiny cots, Clint showed him how to use strong plastic and steel ties to fix the legs together and lay the mattresses sideways before putting on sheets. They did that in Tony and Pepper’s room (from which they removed the desk, lest Tony be tempted) and again in what would be Darcy, Steve and his room. When they did it a third time, Bucky raised an eyebrow. “Thor and Jane aren’t sharing beds yet.”

“It’s not for them. It’s for Nat and me. She has… a preference to wake up beside someone, who she knows, and who can adequately defend themselves from her.”

“With the new direction though…”

“If it goes where you think, that is not your business unless I fuck it up. If it doesn’t and this is just another shared sleep comfort thing, I’m alright with it. Nat knows I’m aware she would turn my testicles into earrings if I assumed she was supposed to give me anything like that if she doesn’t want to. Aside from saying anything out loud, we’ve been together since ’98. My niece calls her Mama Nat, she’s not old enough to care I’m an uncle and Nat is my work partner. We’ve been Dada Clint and Mama Nat since she could talk, and frankly, I don’t want to argue with Lila. She’ll win.”

“How old is your niece?”

“Three.”

“Yeah, that is not the hill you want to die on, my friend. Wait until she starts liking boys.” He thought a moment. “Or girls, I guess, but not in the braid hair and make friendship bracelets way. In the footsie under the table at the dance hall way.”

“I’m so not looking forward to that. My brother is going to be no good at that one. It’s going to be worse than Cooper’s first PTA bake sale. I bribed people in the Chatter Box to get me dirt enough to get that bitch Shelly to back off Laura for being a basically single mom.”

Bucky laughed and they went to rejoin the group in the main level of the Bunker to eat.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Bug zapper- as you may recall, the high frequency emitter that jams audio surveillance used by Darcy and Jane.
Chernobyl’s- nuclear power reactor meltdowns.
Green-bean troopers- new soldiers with very little training.
Contra posture- all weight on one foot, seen in Classical Greek sculpture.
Advanced interrogation- fancy term for torture.
Skynet- a fictional, evil, Artificial Intelligence that began as a Jarvis-ish program in the Terminator 'verse.
SETI- Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence, a real program. I don’t know if they have awards, but I’m betting they would have given Tony props if he’d ID’d Yondu’s landing to get Peter (the thing he almost got when he was 18).
PTSD- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
Fotsie- bumping or rubbing feet together as a public form of intimacy.
Chatter Box- certain analysts listen to radio signals and other communication, called "chatter". I don't know the name of this department, so I nicknamed it.

Notes:
Nuclear proliferation and disarmament treaties happened at the end of the cold war, but knowing the paranoia that the cold war induced, I'd say there's a high likelihood our reported number of nukes was lower than our actual number of nukes. Hiding that would be easiest by putting a new installation over the old launch bases.

Many artificial elements, like Tony's new reactor core, do odd stuff when exposed to certain radiation. I don't know of any that blow up, but it seemed like a good fill for why Tony is trying so hard on the energy front.

How a person stands in different circumstances can tell a keen observer what they feel if the behavior changes. Steve may not see himself as a leader, but this skill comes from having been a leader. And a really good one, the best leaders in adverse situations help all their people be capable of stepping into the leader's shoes if need be, and knowing each others skills that well came of good leadership.

Filk music is a form of modern folk music, often focused on science or science fiction, Fire in the Sky is about the space program in general listen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ryd_p20XEU The Ballad of Apollo XII is more focused on the three absolutely terrifying days of the Apollo 13 flight, you can listen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbL3oNEDvJ0

Wars in general are not good for human minds. Although there are very few records of what happens when someone snaps outwardly, those we do have are bad. Bad enough that the violent rapist cannibal Reavers of the Firefly 'verse. The Serenity, the main ship seen in the show, was a Firefly class cargo ship.

There's a large idea that WWII was full of tough 'walk it off' types. Every single WWII vet I have ever met said that was bull, you did your best to keep people sane enough to be reintroduced into civilian life after because to do otherwise would be leaving a man behind. It didn't always work, and the Howlies had a leg up, but the soldiers did try.

Platonic shared sleep can be very comforting to someone with PTSD, which Nat likely has. It's a part of what has been called the "take the watch" effect, where hyper-vigilance eases up when someone else "takes the watch" for you, letting you relax knowing they're looking out for you. Waking up violently can also be a symptom that increases difficulty sleeping and Clint's ability to stop a half awake Nat from killing him makes him safer.

Teaser:

“The very fact you’re calling me Dollface tells me you know you’re wrong. But please, do tell me the dumbass idea you have about why you can’t fight.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Darcy plans plans, trains with the team and gears up for a mission.

Steve settles into his new life, finds a new breed of bully, and gets a hangover.

Bucky resists field work, changes his mind, and is a big sap.

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took Darcy a day, but between herself, Pepper, Coulson and against anyone except Darcy, Coulson and Natasha’s expectations, Clint, they formulated a schedule of training as a team, getting the two soldiers and Thor up to speed on modern and Midgardian cultural shifts (which she was fairly sure her men would use to troll Tony but good on his days to teach), working to restore Bucky’s control, and making minor actions against a few clustered Hydra cells to the north.

Team training began as a grandstanding show, everyone exhibiting their skills for the rest, while Coulson took notes. Then they started the Batman Versus Superman phase, which had to be postponed for a quick lesson on comic book history for Thor. But with everyone paired off with new people, it was interesting. Or it would be if Clint stopped using sticky glue foam spurting arrows when she was trying to get close to him.

“Dammit Barton! I know you can do hand to hand.”

“So I’ll put down my bow, and you’ll put down your electro-shock gloves, and we’ll try to kill each other like civilized people?”

“No good. I’ve known too many archers.” She pulled a folded cloth from a pouch on her belt and tossed in over a puddle of sticky glue, quickly using the square foot of protected space to help her vault off the springy goop and into a spinning roundhouse kick to Clint’s jaw.

“That’s a Nat move,” he accused from the ground after tapping out.

“Actually, Luchnik, that’s a Darcy move that she taught me,” Nat shouted from her face-off with Steve.

“I thought Barnes trained you,” Tony asked, rising out of a hole Thor had dug with his body.

“Do I look like I have the fucking thighs to do that?” Barnes asked from where Bruce, aided by the
three female scientists, was sweeping the ground with drone controlled lasers, since none of them thought the team was ready to bring Hulk out. “OW.” He pulled his paint pistol and shot out the offending drone.

“Point,” Tony conceded. “Hit the deck, I’m running off of forty times my normal max power,” he called as a bright beam from his chest burst out to hit Thor in the face as Tony hovered to get the height needed on the alien god. Thor was thrown back a good fifty yards.

When they retrieved him, the big blonde was laughing. “I have not had this much fun in combat in ages! I like your Midgardian weapons, Man of Iron. I must take you to Nidavellir sometime, you would get along well with the Dwarves there.”

“Was that a crack at my height?” the shortest male Avenger asked as he helped haul Thor out of his own crater.

“Nay, friend Stark, it is a compliment of your skill of craftsmanship. The Dwarves of Nidavellir are many things great and good and true, but they are also quite particular about craftsmanship. Tis for this reason many do not get along with them. Acid can be their tongues when things they deem unfit are brought before them.”

“Um, Lewis?” Tony looked at the resident translator, Jane somehow getting out of that job despite Thor having formally requested to court her on the basis she wasn’t that fluent in Normal. It might not be Darcy’s first language either, but she was at least good enough to pass if need be.

“They’re tech snobs, Tony, they get hipster superiority level mean about low tech or poorly made tech. Like you.”

“I do not!”

“Pepper gave me footage of you testifying in front of congress. You totally went Mean Girls on Hammer, Regina George.”

“Ouch, fair, but ouch.”

Steve was enjoying the new schedule, team training was fun, but really, what was better was being shown all the history that he’d missed and Darcy hadn’t shown him, either due to lack of time or keeping him from learning about his own historical footprint, or lack of it. Both he and Bucky were decent enough with mundane modern things like cell phones and microwaves, but it was funny calling them ray-cookers in front of Tony. They stopped when Thor caught them before a class and told them they were hurting his ability to keep up and he really didn’t know how microwaves worked and wanted to learn. They laid off after that.

Cultural stuff was another thing entirely. He knew about the civil rights movements, but he was shocked and outraged at how exclusionary modern movements were. Natasha ended up shooting him with a knock-out gun Fitz and Simmons were working on after a particularly loud outburst involving pay equality and the lack of gendered bathroom laws allowing trans people to go where they wanted. Waking up five hours later with a headache was no fun.

“Agh, this is worse than when Bucky drank a margarita and I got Darcy’s hangover,” he complained.

“It bothers me that I understand that sentence,” Clint said, handing him a suspicious opaque red orange drink somewhere in the color wheel between coral and salmon. “Down the hatch and do not
ask what’s in it. You will thank me. Well, once the aftertaste is gone.”

Steve sat up and downed it in one long gulp, working not to spit it out. “What did I just drink? And why did it taste like stale coconut shavings?”

“I told you not to ask, but how do you know what coconut shavings, stale or otherwise taste like? You never served on the Pacific front.”

“I ate an expired Hostess Snowball once when I was swapped out with Darcy. It was horrible.”

“That would do it. Anyway, the stuff was formulated to help with the after effects. Simmons is still working on the right knock-out compounds to fit in the round size Fitz has to work with. This one was more potent than she really wanted it to be, so she whipped that up to get you back up and running faster. If you didn’t already have increased healing speeds, you would be in a coma.”

“Sounds like the Night Night Gun is going to take more work.”

“She hates that name, by the way.”

“I know, but I can’t say her name for it, I’m not good with the long words. What did I miss?”

“The end of Cultural Class and a movie,” Clint said. “Darcy said you’d seen it though. Field of Dreams?”

“Love that movie. What’s next?”

“We were going to hit a cell up north, you in?”

“Is the Arctic chilly? Of course I’m in, Clint. I’m always up for Squid on a Stick,” Steve told him, trying to stand up. His legs wobbled and then straightened as he abruptly lost all the hangover effects. “Wow, Doc Simmons makes good stuff. Let me suit up, I assume this is a flash party?”

“What, the purple armor give it away?” Clint asked cheekily, waving at his secondary suit for non-SHIELD missions, which was indeed a lovely shade of eggplant highlighted in orchid.

“Naw, you wear that for fun, but you invited me, and everyone knows I can’t hide for shit.”

Barton laughed at him, since Steve had taken out Tony, Thor and surprisingly Natasha in the last team paintball game.

“Captain Rogers, may I remind you the Swear Jar Protocol has not been removed in my expansion into the base?” Jarvis asked politely.

“Oh, sorry, uh, an extra round of night shift?”

“Miss Lewis has requested that you not be allowed to disrupt your sleep cycles. May I recommend trash duty, as none on the base enjoy it, and it will give you an opportunity to do physical labor that is neither training nor psychologically motivated.”

“Sure, I can do trash duty this week.” It was a detested task, taking the combined trash generated by the entire base in a week, sorting out recyclables and compostable waste, then driving the stuff not being turned into dirt on one of the lower floors to the tiny one stop sign town a few miles out to dispose of it. But Jarvis was right, it was labor intensive and would help him focus better since it was totally mundane. “You’re good at keeping us together Jarvis.”

“Thank you, as Ms. Potts can attest, I had ample learning experiences with Sir.”
Steve chuckled and went to suit up.

Bucky was not happy. Sure, taking out Hydra cells was why they were out in the desert in the first place, as cover for Loki and the devastating cyber-attack Skye had regaled him with descriptions of, but he wasn’t at all sure of his girlfriend's reasons behind wanting him to go too.

“Dollface, I’m not saying you’re wrong, but I’m not clear enough to go fight with you now.”

“Nat says you’ve cleared every single-use code word in your brain and can resist or redirect nine out of ten of the reusable ones, and none of the remaining codes could cause you to harm us or civilians. I trust that assessment since she deprogrammed herself, and has been nothing but loyal and good in a fight. You’re ready, Bucky.”

“That’s not what I meant, Dollface.”

“The very fact you’re calling me Dollface tells me you know you’re wrong. But please, do tell me the dumbass idea you have about why you can’t fight.” Damn but it was hard to argue with a woman who’d lived in your head and stored half your life in hers. Especially when she looked so good in the navy blue one piece combat suit with the belt hanging just so on her hips.

“I’m currently the worlds most feared assassin. I’m not someone who should be seen fighting alongside you, the Squids will use this to destroy any faith the people have in you. I’ll only dirty your image.”

“Nice try, and it would have worked, if I planned on hauling your shiny metal arm into the light of day. But I don’t. I spent way too much of my life learning not only why the victors wrote the history we have, but how they did it, and let me tell you, the methodology of fear mongering has not evolved that much. I know you will not be visible, you can’t afford that any more than our reputation can. But are you or are you not the same man who broke into the Pentagon, the most secure military facility in the nation, to poison the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation?”

“He was black-mailing scum and you know it.”

“I never said that was a bad thing, I just asked if you could slip in and out of the Fort Knox of official business meetings to kill a guy without even a hint of conspiracy theory, why do you think an animal testing lab in Reno is that different? A lot fewer threats, and this time, if you get seen, just shoot them.”

“God you’re stubborn.”

“You love me for it,” she grinned, cherry lips quirking to the side.

“That I do. You head out a little before me, if they pick up trace on me, it’ll look like I was tracking you after the assassination attempt, off the reservation, but still on the mission. Safer that way.”

“Good call. I asked Fitz to reconfigure your mask and goggles, now they link into our communication net. The strap on the goggles has your earpiece, the mask has your mic. You click your tongue twice to turn on communication, and twice again to put the ears on silent. We haven’t built in a mic shut off yet, so if you need to pass us a message when someone might hear you, use code. Skye and Coulson will be on control, Pepper is handling supply, so if you get hurt, tell her so we can have medical aid ready. Simmons fortunately does have a certification for field medical, and if anything jams tell Fitz, he and Tony reworked your guns, they should be lighter and easier to use now. This is an easy run, Hot Stuff, turn your coms on when you get to the site.”
“I love it when you get bossy.”

“Trust me, you and Rogers are the only ones who feel that way,” Tony called from the door. “Break it up you two, we have squids to fry.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Luchnik- archer, bowman. (Russian)
Hit the deck- get down on the ground.
Flash party- a showy act of force, often a distraction.
Dollface- the name Bucky uses for Darcy when he's made her mad.
Off the reservation- acting without sanction.

Notes:
Batman vs. Superman is a common trope in comic books, pitting two "good" characters against each other to see who will win. Sometimes friendly, like Superman racing The Flash, often very dark, like the Civil War comics and that one where Clark loses it and kills Luthor.

Darcy and Clint's banter is based off two different scenes from The Princess Bride, both spoken by The Man in Black.

Mean Girls is a movie about mean popular high school girls, the worst of whom was Regina George.

Coconut really wasn't a thing in America until after we made Hawaii a state and a bunch of GI's came home hooked, much like pineapples were prohibitively expensive prior to Dole plantations in Hawaii.

Physical exercise can be grounding, but for individuals who associate it with life or death situations, may not be the most restful. Finding a normal physical task to do can help soldiers reintegrate better.

The director of the FBI mentioned is J. Edgar Hoover, who did indeed keep blackmail files on basically everyone who was anyone in Washington DC. His death was... odd to say the least, but there are no conspiracy theories that I know of about it.

Fort Knox is the federal gold reserve, and therefore is often credited with the highest security of any building. I don't know if there is anywhere with more, but it's a saying.

Teaser:

"Anyone ever tell you you're kind of scary?"
“No, never once in my whole war fighting, assassinating life has anyone ever said that I was scary.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The team takes down a Hydra base, Bucky gets to free a prisoner, and everyone's a little screwy in the head. They couldn't be Avengers if they weren't.

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy still loved the fight. It was weird and twisted, but somehow, every time she rounded a corner and knocked out a Hydra scientist or goon, she felt a little giddy rush. She liked fighting beside Steve instead of inside Steve. She liked how he called out clock hour positions as they took out clusters of bad guys, helping her aim and defend herself. She liked seeing Natalia blind and shock and overwhelm opponents who never thought their death was a petite red headed Russian. She liked the loud booming laughter of Thor as he destroyed the instruments of death they built here, and the way he was teaching Hulk to count by counting the “smash” mid-fight. It was like a weird Legolas and Gimli parody, but it seemed to be working. She liked the sudden introduction of odd arrows to the fight from some rafter or vent, turning small areas into fire or oil slicks, some arrows even hitting targets, but mostly just causing confusion and chaos.

“Somebody tell me we’re recording this,” she said as she decked a scientist who had his pants literally on fire.

“We are,” reassured Natasha. “I want Tony to see this first thing when he wakes up.” Since Tony was on the com line back in the surveillance van, everyone knew who she was talking about.

“Good point,” Clint said over the coms, “that little shit would love this.”

“Clint, you’re the one doing it. Stop bragging,” Steve chided as he and Darcy ducked through a door. Her whole body locked up and her breath came in too fast and shallow. The chair. Or one like it. Oh God. “Hulk, I have a situation,” Steve said calmly, “I need smash, and I need it now.”

Hulk’s bellow shook the floor like a speaker set up at a rave, but his footsteps shook it like a small earthquake. Darcy distantly processed being moved to the side as Hulk made the door fit him. She felt more when he shredded the chair. She finally took a normal breath as the scrap that had been a chair fell out of Hulk’s hands.

“Darcy not scared now?” he asked her. She choked on what might have been laughter or tears. Uncontrollable rage monster her sweet tits, this guy was amazing.

“Darcy very much not scared now. Thank you for smashing that thing for me, Hulk.”
“Thing hurt Darcy.”

“Yes, often, too many times to count.”

“Hulk can count,” he said. “Twenty-four,” he pointed to the chair remains.

“Good, let’s find you twenty-five.”

Then she was fighting again and everything made sense. Fights were simple, take them down before they take you down. She couldn’t do that to her own fears. She was lucky to have a team.

“Darcy! I’m out of arrows and there are robo-squids in the vents!”

She rolled her eyes. “Get something non-conductive between you and the metal, Hawkeye. Steve, I need a boost.” She shook her shock gloves rapidly before using them to pummel the metal of the duct above them, shocking it with waves of current. “That do it?”

“Yeah, they fried more than a carnival Twinkie. Anyone ever tell you you’re kind of scary?”

“No, never once in my whole war fighting, assassinating life has anyone ever said that I was scary,” Darcy said sarcastically. “Bring one back, I’m sure engineering will want a look.”

“ Damn straight I do,” Tony muttered over the coms.

Steve was grateful for all the team training the resident planners had put them through. It was paying off as he dodged through a minefield of little shock bombs Natasha spread everywhere and Clint rained seemingly random chaos on their enemies. He knew how the pair worked, though, and it wasn’t random at all. It might not be planned, exactly, but the two worked together to drive the unwary into their traps. They hunted, stalked, laid the traps and brought down the prey. Thor was calculating under his big dumb puppy persona, he may have been wrecking the place, but he never compromised the structure. He never put the team at risk, and he was teaching Hulk, both counting and where not to smash. Hulk was happy as long as the team was happy, and he stuck to Darcy’s rule from New York about inanimate objects. He could be remarkably gentle with people, preferring to put them in a corner and order them to stay put. Most did. Steve couldn’t blame them; he’d seen how Hulk had reacted to seeing Darcy’s fearful stare at the odd dentist chair contraption. His demolition had turned the complex machine into metal and plastic confetti.

The last of the fight went out of the Hydra agents, and Steve signaled a stand down. Barton dropped from an overhead vent to the ground, a metallic octopi the size of a small dog under his arm. Natasha carefully gathered her shock bomb traps and Thor shook debris off his cape.

“Hulk go now?” the big green hero asked.

“Uh,” Steve stalled out, Hulk had become Dr. Banner pretty quickly after New York, it had seemed like going to sleep. But he’d also been resistant to letting Bruce come out, and the way Bruce sometimes talked about him, Steve couldn’t say he blamed Hulk.

“Are you tired, Hulk?” Darcy asked patiently.

“No,” he rumbled. It sounded like a kid who didn’t want to go to bed. Darcy must have thought so too.

“I am, you can stay but I would really like it if you would hold me so I can lay down.” When he
hesitated, Darcy made a baby rocking shape with her arms and Hulk got the idea, letting Darcy climb up to rest. “Thanks Hulk. So, what do you all think we should do with them?”

“You know I don’t like witnesses,” Natasha said, sharpening a knife Steve wasn’t sure where she’d gotten from. “Is sloppy.”

“Now, Nat,” Barton said, and Steve knew it was another trap. “You’re trying to go good. In general, killing isn’t good.”

“But these fiends have broken many oaths, should I take their medals meanings right. Do not all the healers of the Nine Realms swear to do no harm? Great harm has been done here. Do we ignore such dishonor as that?”

Steve was about to play the dancing monkey when Hulk spoke up. “Gold hair woman, there, she not bad. Not smash not bad people. Wrong.”

Steve looked at the woman Hulk had identified, she looked as scared as any of the scientists, but there was something else, something familiar. His mind with its horribly perfect recall gave him a unit of Sonderkommandos, fresh from liberation, eyes averted from their friends and family. Guilt, unwilling and unwelcome, yet unwavering all the same.

“Ma’am, I want you to stand up and come over here.” She nodded quickly, stood awkwardly and walked over to the gathered Avengers.

“Steve,” Tony said on the coms, “look at her leg.” Steve glanced down to give the tiny camera in his cowl a better angle and saw it himself.

“Son of a… sorry ma’am,” Steve said as he bent to pull up her pant leg. “Anybody else think that looks like a bomb?” he asked.

“FUCK!” Barton swore, diving down with a small set of lock picks. “Nat, pass me a flame-stopper arrow, blue band at the fletching.”

She handed it to him as the archer pulled the anklet off the sobbing scientist and he jammed it into the workings, covering the bomb in dense, sticky, fire hardening foam. A muffled bang sounded and Darcy and Nat both winced.

“Steve, she did not work here willingly,” Darcy said softly. “We can’t punish her for this. We also can’t put her back in public circulation yet, the other cells will kill her for escaping. She’s got too many secrets. I don’t give a fuck what we do with the guilty ones, but we can’t let her die too. I can’t, she’s too much like…”

“Too much like me,” Bucky finished for her on the coms. “I’m fifteen minutes out. Put the fear of the Winter Soldier in ‘em. I’ve faked enough deaths to do hers too. Darcy gave me back all the Howlie deaths I pulled, plus a few others. Call Fres when you get clear.”

Steve nodded. Looking at the rest of the prisoners. “Well, we do happen to have a crazy, trigger happy, metal armed assassin who doesn’t seem to care about collateral on our tail. She can hide in that closet, and we’ll gift wrap these for him.” He watched faces go pale with fear, except one man in the back. Natasha saw it too, since she tossed him the duct tape.

“Tie them up,” she ordered. He did so, passing hand signs when they wouldn’t be caught. Nat grabbed his wrists and bound them after he was done. “We need information. I’ll make you talk, little man.”
Steve ushered the woman to the closet, she didn’t need to see whatever Bucky decided to do. “Stay here, stay quiet.” He paused, unsure what to tell her about Bucky. “Even if the Ghost of War Past looks like the Ghost of War Yet to Come, trust him. Reapers bring in good crops, too.”

“You’re a nerd, Rogers,” Bucky said into his coms. “Clear out, I’m ETA in five minutes.”

Steve closed the door and waved the team back to the van they’d taken, one of Phil’s, bullet-proof and hooked up with defense systems better than forts Steve had seen.

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Bucky liked the motorcycle. Tony had found it and began using it to tinker the day they moved in. As a result it had some better than standard features, like a built in Jarvis for directions, speed reminders, traffic alerts, and horn activation. Of course, because Tony was Tony, and Bucky had called dibs on the bike before Steve or Natalia could, the default horn setting was a harsh song riff about dirty deeds done dirt cheap. Little did Tony know Bucky sweet talked Jarvis into letting him have a secondary horn setting, the sound of an old-fashioned fog horn. He’d also stolen Tony’s phone and changed the default ring tone to the original Jack Haley version of “If I only had a heart” from The Wizard of Oz. He turned on his coms as he slowed to enter the residential side of town on his way to the warehouse on the other side. He had to go under the speed limit and avoid traffic cameras, slowing him down. He heard what sounded like a gun with a suppressor go off, followed by Darcy explaining why she wouldn’t kill the woman who’d gotten trapped. He volunteered to take the job and swerved around a school zone. Too many cameras. As he cleared the residential area he heard Steve’s badly coded message and would have rolled his eyes.

“You’re a nerd, Rogers. Clear out, I’m ETA in five minutes.” He didn’t get a response; he didn’t expect one.

Inside the compound, he swiftly executed the Hydra agents and used a knife to carve the words Failure is Unacceptable into the bloody drywall behind them. He’d been told that, so many times, always coupled with pain, punishments, drugs that made him lose reality. He cleaned himself up, disabled the cameras, and realized that he had no idea which closet the innocent was in.

Darcy, which closet did Steve put the woman in?

Janitorial, on the right as you leave.

Bucky went to the correct closet, opened it and got a face full of bleach. The mask and goggles protected him, but he was still a little bit blind from liquid beading on them when she swung a mop handle at him. He grabbed it with his metal hand and stared at her wide-eyed fear.

“Cripes, lady, I ain’t here to kill you, could you kindly not kill me?” Bucky sighed and pulled his rig off before the fumes got trapped inside. “My dork of a boyfriend wants me to fake your death for you. I’m pretty good at it.”

“Captain America… is gay?”

“No. Do you people have any cadavers down here?”

“Then who’s your boyfriend? The morgue is in there.” Bucky went in and flipped through the chart.

“Captain America. Pardon for asking, but do you weigh under 145?”

“T’m 152, but I lie on my driver’s license. You just said he wasn’t gay.”
“He isn’t, we also have a girlfriend. Neither of us is gay. I think we count as polyamorous bisexuals, but I need to look into the terms more. Help me find locker K-10.” She led him to a metal door and he opened it, hauling out a slim woman close to his evacuee’s body type. “Ok, I’m going to switch your dental records with hers, where’s the computer?”

“Over here, there are also paper copies.”

“Get them, for you and her. Bring them here, I may have to do some calligraphy.”

“You do calligraphy?”

“It’s a name for forgery. Snap snap, Karen.”

“My name isn’t Karen, it’s Isabelle.”

“It will be Karen soon. Go.” While she was out of the room, he switched the digital finger print and dental files on the two women, logged the deceased as cremated the day before, and dressed the corpse in the standard uniform of the scientists. When she returned, he quickly skimed the files, swapped the direct information and pictures, and filled out blank forms that related identifying marks to make the kidnapped scientist the one with the scorpion tail tattoo, and handed the files back. “Go put those away.”

When she left, he hauled the corpse to the janitor’s closet he’d found her in, opened and knocked over a jug of lye onto the face of the corpse, took the extra bleach, poured it in a jug of ammonia, capped it loosely and put it by the right hand. Closing the door, he took the new Karen to an all-night internet café. There he sent Skye the basic details of the new life, and waited. He got an email two bags of chips and a smoothie later. Printing out the details, he handed her the pre-paid reservation at a motel and told her to wait. Her new driver’s license would be mailed there soon.

“They told stories about you,” she said at the curb. “Like you were the boogey man. Be good, be compliant, or the Winter Soldier will get you.”

“Winter Soldiers have never been the complying type, or did you not read Thomas Paine? Freedom is more important, don’t let your second chance at it go to waste.” He turned on the bike. “Don’t tell this story until mine comes out in full. Good luck, Miss Page. Your new life will be there in four to five business days. Do you know how to use a gun?”

“Yes, before they took me I did manage to shoot one of them. Torso, near the liver not heart or head. I wouldn’t say I’m good.”

He pulled out his smallest gun, the one meant for if he was ever compromised. It had been stripped of all identifying marks. “Get better. You’re going to need to defend yourself. Trust the man called Fres, he’ll contact you at the motel. Don’t open the door unless Fres tells you it’s shiny. Don’t ever try for a job in your field again, find another way to satisfy your need for answers. Got it?”

“Fres, shiny, learn to shoot, new job. Got it.”

He rode off back to the bunker. It felt good being the good guy again.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Clock hour positions- a position based on where a person is looking, on your three is directly right, twelve o'clock is straight ahead, etc.

Fried Twinkie- a staple of horrible for you yet tasty carnival and circus foods.

Sonderkommandos- the name for units of Jewish prisoners who were strong armed into helping with the corpse disposal in Nazi concentration camps. Not a lot made it out, and those that did had major PTSD.

Fletching- the part of the arrow with feathers.

ETA- estimated time of arrival.

Fres- Morita's call-sign

Shiny- Firefly slang for all good, adopted as code use by HERO

Notes

The Legolas and Gimli reference is to the running gag in the Lord of the Rings movie where Legolas and Gimli keep score of enemies killed.

Darcy is having a mild dissociation event with the chair. She's not fully out of it, but it's enough to lock her up until the trigger (the chair) is gone. Steve and Hulk handle it correctly, keeping her safe and removing the trigger.

Most air-ducts are made of metal, a conductive material. Most robots are also made of metal. Hawkeye's uniform, non-conductive, therefore it is safe for Darcy to overload the duct work with electric charge.

In canon, Clint worked at a circus prior to becoming a SHIELD agent. Hence his fried Twinkie reference.

In my canon, Hulk is seven, so he has some grasp of morality and fragility of human bodies. He also has a much higher EQ (the measure of emotional intelligence) than most people, because he was made out of all Bruce's repressed emotion. Sure that was a lot of anger, but there were other things too, and being made of that makes him an emotional genius. This is partly how he can make accurate judgments about who is good and who is bad, he sees the emotional reactions and pinpoints discrepancies. Steve can do the same, but not as quickly.

The issue of the Winter Soldier's guilt/innocence in canon revolves around autonomy. A true crime requires a guilty mind, a decision to do the crime, which when lacking in control of your own body, you can't have. The scientist didn't have that either, although more from threat of death than actual control.

Steve is riffing on the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Christmas Yet to Come from Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. Additionally, the Grim Reaper is Death, but harvests only come in when someone goes and reaps the harvest. He's a nerd.

If I Only Had a Heart is a song from Wizard of Oz, which came out in 1939, sung by the character Tinman about how much he wants a heart.

Sexuality isn't as black and white as many people think. Bucky has no spare fucks to give on the confusion caused by the concept of a bi, poly triad.

With the damage he caused to the corpse, identifying would go down to finger prints and dental, which he switched the records on. Additionally, bleach and ammonia create a deadly gas, so whoever finds that body will have more to worry about than ensuring accuracy.
Teaser:

“I thought ‘textbook narcissist’ was a little shallow. I’m sorry I was such a dick of a boss. Sorry Steve,” he said looking up.
“No, that is anatomically accurate,” Natasha said.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Darcy organizes the Avengers, then gets roped into organizing keeping them sane.

Steve watches Tony and Natasha make strides in personal revelation and trust.

Bucky voices some legitimate concerns that turn out to be unnecessary.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To quadrad, Selene_Aduial, tigrisliilium, Joey99, halfelf87, Darylslover33, Valkyriefromunderland, BloodElf, Lady_Layla, AliceMadisonParker, KiraKyuu, SionnachOiche3, aquadrop25, Shadows_of_Shemai, Notashamed, Mslight, Reesachan (Clymenestra), SerialObsessor (DiStar71), Matlida_Nicki, Jade01, psyche29 and the 27 new kudo-ers.

I'm officially resuming my Monday-Friday posting schedule. Huzzah!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy trained, organized, and finally let Coulson talk to her. He wasn’t a therapist, most therapy didn’t happen over slushies and patently bad snack food from the nearest 7-11, but he’d been a handler most of her life. Since that was sort of her job before New York had happened, he knew the sorts of stress she had. Somehow, it all came out over a blue raspberry slushie, five taquitos, and a family sized bag of cool ranch Doritos on the curb of the convenience store. Afterwards, she puked up a disgusting blue and orange mix, gross-sobbed for a minute into her hands and let Phil clean her up with wet wipes and a bottle of water.

“We should get the rest of the team doing this,” he said blandly on the way back.

“Puking?”

“Talking,” he corrected kindly. “You’ll find it helps. You do feel better now than you did before, right?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “And I’m familiar with therapy, I spent World War Two in a psych hospital. I’m just questioning your sanity trying to get the others in on it.”

“Tell them you did it, and it helped. It doesn’t have to be me, I think Tony, Clint, Natasha and Bucky could probably work through their time being held captive if they had each other for support. Tony, Bucky and Bruce could discuss the unique ways they experience body dysmorphia. Clint, Natasha, and Bruce could talk about harmful childhoods, and I think Hulk might want to be in on that too. Steve, Bucky, and Thor already have a nicely knit group based on world disparity, if we prompt them to talk about it.”
Darcy nodded, it could work. Or it could backfire horribly. “We have to make it organic. If it’s structured therapy, they’d balk. Pauk would go running for the hills.”

“I’m aware of Natasha’s aversion to therapy. I’m also aware of her weakness for a certain recipe of cookie I have yet to give to Clint. If you get Clint talking when cookies might be available, she’ll stay. Maybe even talk, to blend in if others are talking.”

“We can try, but no pushing them, Phil. I mean it, some stress fractures will flat out break if you put weight on them.”

“I know that Darcy. Why do you think I hauled your life story out with slushies and taquitos? I’m a handler, I get paid to notice things. You eat sugar and grease when you’re stressed, but heavier foods and wine when you’re avoiding it. If you can’t get wine, you drink carbonated apple cider or other fruit based soft drink. I knew when you got a blue raspberry slushie you could handle talking about it, and probably needed to.”

“And if Clint is baking and Natasha is eating what Clint is baking, they can handle talking.”

“Exactly. I’m not sure how to get the others involved, though,” Phil admitted. “Tony never finished the paperwork on his file, most of Bruce’s file was permanently removed by General Ross, I have no clue on Thor, and a month ago I wouldn’t have thought Captain America and Bucky Barnes’ mental stability would be my job.”

“You aren’t alone in that job,” Darcy reminded him. Pulling out her phone she sent a mass text. Pepper, Skye, Fitz and Simmons were waiting when they pulled the truck into the underground garage.

“So what’s the sitch?” Skye asked Darcy as they got out of the car.

“Do I look like Wade to you, Kim Possible? No, don’t answer that. Welcome to the first meeting of the “Friends of Heroic Hot Messes club.” We are all agreed that my fellow Avengers and I have serious issues, yes?”

Everyone looked around and nodded. Pepper raised a perfectly manicured hand.

“Pepper, it’s not high school, just ask,” Jemma said.

“Can I call Rhodey? He’s been helping me keep Tony alive most of the time I’ve known him. Tony and he had a falling out over the War Machine rig, and Tony lying about being sick, but I know he’d want to help.”

“Good thought, but no,” Phil said gently. “Colonel Rhodes is under surveillance, and has been his entire friendship with Tony. We can’t bring him in until we’ve gotten all the squids out of SHIELD and the Air Force.”

“I can set up a silent chat for him, though,” Skye said. “Sort of like a dead drop, but in cyberspace. Between Swapper and me, we’ll have any watchers chasing their tails.”

“Tony is in a much greater need of immediate intervention,” Darcy admitted. “But he can’t know we’re intervening. None of them can, stubborn cusses. So, I want all of you to find ways to get the following groups to at least try to talk about these topics,” she began, listing the various issues the Avengers had. “It doesn’t have to be structured, in fact it shouldn’t, but they need to vent a little on it. Figure it out, and in the immortal words of Tim Gunn, make it work.” Everyone nodded and went back into the heated bunker. Even in the garage, the desert made it surprisingly cold at night. As Phil left, Darcy glanced up at the old-style security camera she knew was linked into Jarvis.
“You know I meant you, too, right? You’re a part of our team, Iron Man suit or no.”

“Thank you, Miss Lewis. I will endeavor to do my best.”

“Good to have you on our side, Jarvis. And if you need to talk about the space thing, or the Stark Tower thing, I’d be willing to listen. I don’t know if it would help an artificial emotional structure like it would a wetware system, but I’d at least let you try it.”

“Of course, Miss Lewis. When I am ready, I shall let you know.”

Steve noticed Natasha carrying herself strangely ever since the fight. He didn’t know why. She wasn’t injured, she had given Barton enough lectures on not reporting injuries for Steve to know that. It wasn’t the man they’d taken out for ‘questioning’ either, he’d been a HERO agent planted in Hydra and very cooperative in the debrief. He’d left as soon as they got him a fake ID and a bus ticket to Vegas where a better new identity waited. It still bothered Steve that Natasha held herself so tightly. She looked casual, but she wasn’t. He’d seen Natasha being casual. He expected Barton to figure it out and help her fix it, but that wasn’t happening.

Between his own worries and some none-too-subtle nudging from Dr. Simmons, he figured he should at least show up for Barton’s final result of practicing the new Italian cookie recipe Phil had given him. The computers might have been a technical travesty when they arrived (he wouldn’t know, he didn’t use them on Skye or Tony’s level) but the kitchen was what Clint called a ‘Retro Apocalypse Barbie Dream House’ which apparently was a good thing. He liked the tall kitchen chairs that went at the breakfast bar, he could stretch his legs out while sitting on them, unlike many dining chairs. The appealing smell of chocolate and spice drew a few others to the room as well. Bucky was gravitating towards the promise of sugar as he always did, but since he was also messing with Tony by pretending not to understand how Google worked and insisting Tony apologize to the poor reference librarian who had to go get all the strange things Tony had looked up, Tony was with him. Bucky settled in at the bar next to Steve, breaking his tormenting of Tony to kiss his boyfriend, a thing both of them loved being able to do in front of everyone without a blink. Tony seemed to have given up on explaining search engines, but stayed when he saw Natasha’s predatory stare at the oven. Everyone got used to her reaction to Clint being ready to share his newest treats.

“Come on, come on,” she muttered.

“Patience, Nat, seriously, I was not the only assassin in our duo, you know how to wait,” Clint scolded from the bowl of chocolate glaze he was mixing in a stand mixer.

“I know how, obviously, I was trained in the Red Room. They also trained me to kill a man over the course of a week using a cheese grater. Just because I know I can, doesn’t mean I should. Or want to,” Natasha said smugly.

“You do realize the glaze and cookies have to cool before you can eat them, right?” her partner teased. Nat stuck her tongue out at him.

“How are you more of a child now than when you were twelve?” Darcy asked, sauntering in to scoot under Bucky’s metal arm. Her sass must have kicked off Clint’s protective side.

“Because she can be,” he snapped as he pulled the baking sheet from the oven and set them away from Natasha. “You of all people should know what her childhood was.”

“Hey, stop picking on Darcy,” Bucky said hotly and Steve worried this would get ugly. “I was there
too, you know. And it’s not like we didn’t try to get Natka to act like a little girl and not a weapon. It was her worst class, actually. She was almost cut from the roster because of it. In Red Room, that involved a lot more literal cutting than you’d think it should."

Clint and Tony blinked.

“But you’re the world’s best spy,” Tony said incredulously. “You were a triple agent and nobody knew until you told them, even though I can’t keep a secret to save my life.”

“Black Widow is the world’s best spy,” Darcy corrected in defense of her adopted daughter. “Natka wasn’t her yet. We all have awkward phases, or have you forgotten most of 91 through 08?”

That reminded him of something, and Tony looked like he needed rescuing. “You can keep a secret, Tony, to save someone else’s life.”

“What do you know about it!” Tony shouted, and everyone jumped. “He was the one who went off play, he was the one who lied his ass off for me, he was the one who made Iron Man. And he died doing it.” Tony was about to stalk off when Darcy intercepted him.

“I’m pretty sure Steve meant my brother. My brother had better not have died.” She narrowed scary eyes at Tony. “Clarify. Now.”

What happened next made Steve want to puke. Tony told them the story, all of it, every detail of Ho Yinsen and the Ten Rings and the torture and building the suit and the break out and Yinsen’s death. At the end, Tony looked like a wrung out rag, and Darcy pulled him into a hug.

“I lost people too, you know. I got mine back, but… I’m proud of you for sharing this with us, that was tough. And I’m glad you trust us enough to say it.” Tony just sniffled into her shoulder.

Natasha left the kitchen, to everyone’s amazement, and tapped Tony on the shoulder.

“I lied about you,” she said quietly. “I was trained from four years old to pinpoint weaknesses, identify strengths, avoid detection as I took someone apart from the inside. They shaped me into a parasite, a tumor. I wouldn’t be a child for them, because they didn’t deserve a child, and no child deserved what they did. Training to kill and emotionally destroy people isn’t for children, love is for children, and what love I got was not from the Red Room. When Fury sent me to assess you, I knew what he would do to you if I told the truth, how he can manipulate. I know how to handle that, but you were just starting to recover from Stane. If Fury couldn’t see and respect that from a short look at your file, he didn’t deserve you, and you didn’t deserve what he would have done to get you. So, I lied. I’m sorry.”

Steve had no idea what that was about but Tony was nodding. “I thought ‘textbook narcissist’ was a little shallow. I’m sorry I was such a dick of a boss. Sorry Steve,” he said looking up.

“No, that is anatomically accurate,” Natasha said. “You were very much a talking phallus when I was Natalie Rushman. I’m glad you and Pepper are happy together, you were such oblivious idiots. Well, you were, Pepper had some reasonable hesitation about the maturity gap. You were sort of like a child, and that would have been wrong.”

Tony laughed. “I’ve never been so happy to be insulted in my life. Thanks, Natasha.” She nodded and the moment was broken with the tiny clink of the plates with their cookies being set down.

<>

Bucky cornered Darcy and Phil one night after dinner but before the board game they had picked out was fully set up. It was some murder mystery thing that had promise, in such a deductive group, but
Bucky had a different mystery.

“I know what you’re doing,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Darcy asked him, while Phil kept a straight face.

“The talking. The little breakdowns that shine a light on what needs fixing. The way people treat each other differently. Natasha isn’t at all stiff around Clint anymore, Bruce was willing to bring Hulk out for some training. That didn’t happen on its own. Which one of you was responsible?”

Darcy quirked her brows. “That seems to imply the talking, fixing, kindness, and team bonding are bad things. Do you think those are bad things?”

“You know I don’t. But how you’re doing it, it’s manipulative, Darcy. None of them know how hard you’ve been pushing their buttons. People aren’t puppets.”

“I understand why you would feel that way,” Phil began, but Darcy cut him off.

“You really don’t, Phil,” she warned. Looking back at him, he watched the green flecks dance in her hazel eyes. “I know I’m using Red Room methods. That doesn’t make them wrong, and I think you’re underestimating the team.”

“Those methods break people, Darcy. That is wrong, by definition. You’re cracking them open like mason jars and pouring in what you want to see like it’s soup. You are betraying what we swore not to become. I won’t stand for it.”

“Then don’t. Sit down.” She marched him into the area appropriated for games. He sat sullenly on the love seat by the table. “Bucky has raised some concerns. They effect all of you if I go with his assessment, so I’m bringing it to you. First of all, awareness and consent. Raise your hand if you’ve noticed the non-combatants nudging you to places and situations where you talk about your pasts.” Every hand shot up. “Keep them up if you could have escaped that.” The hands stayed up. “Alright, so you knowingly allowed us to get you to open up. Hands up if you think that’s playing puppets with you, or manipulation.” The hands went down.

“Simmons cannot lie to save her life,” Natasha said. “If the terminally honest woman wants me to talk, it is because she is worried. And she makes good non-alcoholic cocktails.”

“Agreed,” Pepper said. “I liked your virgin Scotch thing. It even tricked Tony the first time.”

“Thank you, it was really quite simple from a bio-chemical standpoint…”

“Shush, my smart summer child,” Tony said. “Never reveal your secrets.”

“All right,” Darcy began again. “What’s the general feeling on weekly therapy sessions with a psychiatrist?” The whole room tensed. Bucky could see Bruce readying to run, Tony covering his arc reactor, Natasha and Clint reaching for weapons, and Steve going paler than a sheet. “I’m going to take that as a no, possibly a hell no. All in favor of the non-combatants continuing to poke us into better mental health with fake booze, cookie recipes, and stress relief activities like board game night, movie night, and the Goldburg Tetris I know Skye gave Tony and Bruce?” Hands shot up again as the room relaxed.

Bucky eyed Darcy and Phil. “It doesn’t feel right. We learned those from the Red Room, the way to unmake someone.”

“You aren’t unmaking me,” Clint said. “I know what that feels like, having someone in your head,
playing with your brain. It sucks, and he was going easy on me. This isn’t that. This is having other people help put a puzzle back together. Yeah, they touch my mind in ways I might ordinarily not like, but they also make sure all the pieces are right side up and help me find that one stupid sky piece that always goes under the table. I like this. If I didn’t, this place has a good enough duct system and enough no-cook food you wouldn’t see me outside missions.”

“I don’t know about you, Buck, but I want to play the game,” Steve said. “You know you could have talked to me first.”

“No he couldn’t,” Natasha defended. “We learned in ways you can’t forget that the people closest to you are in the best place to stab your back. He was covering yours.”

“And I’m glad he was,” Darcy said, giving Steve a quick peck before settling on the floor in front of Bucky.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Pauk- Darcy's nickname for Nat.
Dead drop- a method spies use to transfer information covertly.
Swapper- Skye's nickname for Darcy.
Natka- a child-form of the name Natalia. While Bucky and Darcy sometimes think of/call her Talia, that's more of an adult's familiar name. When a child, not a teen, she would have been Natka.
Off play- against the plan.
Mason jars- a popular home-canning system in use in the Depression and during rationing.
Goldburg Tetris- a hypothetical alteration to the classic block-stacking game Tetris using gravity and air resistance modifications like The Incredible Machine used to make creating Rube Goldburg devices more challenging. The idea came from Ysabetwordsmith on Ao3, specifically her Love is For Children series.

Notes:
It can be very difficult to get a trauma survivor to talk about it. Phil has an advantage in being trained to know when and how to extract information, in this case, so Darcy could talk about her issues. Darcy herself makes good points about organic decisions to talk, versus structured therapy, and is right, certain traumas can be re-victimizing to discuss under pressure.

What’s the sitch? was the catchphrase of cartoon teen spy Kim Possible, used when in contact with her hidden, indoor only, handler, Wade.

Tim Gunn worked on Project Runway, and when confronted with a clothing design he did not think would work, rather than reprimand designers, he would say 'make it work'.

I don't know how an AI would perceive and handle psychological trauma, but I would assume having large chunks of infrastructure destroyed and his creator, his dad, fly a suicide mission did Jarvis no good.

Simmons is canonically a horrible liar in Season One of Agents of SHIELD. This changed by Season two, but we are nowhere near that now, so her hints are more like a
If you were wondering, I have an image of the Bunker as being vaguely like Fallout 4 in aesthetic choice, in that it is retro in style, having been built in the Cold War, and also designed to survive nuclear winter.

Clint is making Italian meatball cookies, a Christmas staple that combines chocolate and spice cookie elements, a good recipe is here: http://allrecipes.com/recipe/10214/meatball-cookies/

Natasha is too good a spy to fall for Tony's public facade, and under the social armor, he's NOT a narcissist, textbook or otherwise. In fact, from his behavior during her on screen interactions, I would say adult survivor of childhood abuse with slightly abnormal fawn response in the form of wildly outlandish giving.

The game is Clue, which came out after the war, but would indeed be fun to play with that group, although I think handicaps would need to come into play as the group learns it.

Psychological manipulation is not as inherently bad as Bucky sees it, because he's only seen it used to hurt people. The key to knowing when it's wrong and when it's not is to gauge if the person is aware of the nudging, and capable of avoiding them. Generally if the answer to those is yes, it's not morally wrong. In this case it is less harmful, and the team knows it, than blunt therapy.

Teaser:

“They signed with Ross, Winterfell, do they need another reason to be stupid? Say thanks to the Greatly Bumbling One, God of Imperial Stormtroopers, and haul ass.”
Darcy knew she’d been doing well with the team, but her interactions with HERO continued as well. Mostly her job was resource delegation and approval of actions. The system was incredibly streamlined, and had been since Byzantine joined. Which was why Phil had that callsign in the first place, a joke about the Lost Bureaucrat of Byzantium, an ancient political power run by bureaucracy. His new system had allowed her to save hundreds of man-hours a day, minimize unnecessary forms, and increase efficient deployment of operatives.

It also meant that when things she had flagged as Priority 3 or higher happened, she got the incident report immediately. Which is why when a Rising Tide hactivist following SHIELD activity caught Dr. Betty Ross on a nightclub security camera, she could send the order to follow the woman by camera. She was good at hiding, only a surprise interception by a guy who looked like he benched in Steve’s weight-class during an altercation with Crossbones had her face the hidden camera enough for an ID. But once her team of elite hackers, who ironically called themselves The Hacks, got the body profile and gait sample from the parking lot, followed the car to the hospital, followed her to a taxi, and saw her come out of her apartment the next day, no amount of wigs, sunglasses, or makeup could hide her.

“Bruce?” she called.

“Lunch isn’t going to be ready for another three hours, Darcy, you knew that when you voted for pot-roast last night,” the gamma-expert called back from the kitchen.

“Yeah, can you put that on a simmer for tonight? We have a looong overdue lunch date.”

“With who?” he asked cautiously. “I’ll need to make something light for later if the Other Guy has to make an appearance. I’m never up to sturdy stuff then.”

“I sort of doubt you’ll be letting Hulk out when we go to see Betty,” Darcy said casually as Tony walked into the main room. Bruce dropped something metal in the kitchen and scrambled into her
office doorway. Actually, it was just a wide alcove in the main room’s wall formed by buttressing. With the cork-boards, whiteboards and magnetic panels she had added to hold extra notes she didn’t trust to cyber storage, however, it looked like a small office. She even had the desk and chair stolen from Tony’s room.

“Betty as in Betty Ross?” Tony asked before Bruce could. “Brucie-bear’s long lost love, Betty?”

“No,” Darcy drawled. “Betty Grable, famous chorus dancer, actress and pin-up model of World War Two. Of course I mean Doctor Betty Ross! I’ve been trying to get her into HERO since I founded the damn thing, in 1991. And in 2011, man my life is odd, I founded the same thing in two separate years, two decades apart.”

“You know where Betty is?” Bruce asked over her musings.

“I do indeed. Sound the Assemble, Jarvis, I want us covered on all sides with this. Doctor Ross is not to be injured, threatened or have her ass of a father or anyone reporting to him come within five hundred yards, actually make that two miles, in case he has snipers. Tell the techs I need them too, I want to know how the drones are coming.”

A sharp but unalarming ping sounded throughout the halls, echoing as Darcy assembled her report. The base’s occupants filed in quickly and efficiently, if a bit unorganized and sloppy. That could be her biography, Darcy thought, Quick, Efficient, and a Total Mess; a Darcy Lewis Story. When everyone was there, she walked out in front of her desk.

“We have a new mission, for anyone interested in it. C and E, contact and extraction, the ‘E’ contingent on the outcome of the ‘C’, as always.” She nodded at Natasha, who had gone on a few missions with Red Room where the ‘E’ wasn’t optional. She didn’t organize her people that way. “Ideally, we recruit, if not, we verify safety and add measures as is necessary and requested.”


“Like I’m letting you two loons out without me,” Steve said sarcastically. “Come on, Buck, I had Nat help me pick out good undercover outfits for us, I’ll show you.” The two moved off, Clint and Nat nodded and left as well.

“I’m certainly going to help my Science Bro go get his girl,” Tony said.

“Key word, Tony,” Darcy warned. “Undercover.”

“Lewis, I know how to forge iron with an anvil and a hammer. Several hammers, a few tongs, you know, it’s much more finicky than people think, but my point is, I did not learn that as Tony Stark. I spent two years of college doing on-line classes and getting a mastery in blacksmithing under a false identity. I don’t show it off much, because what good is a hidden weapon people see, but I have it.”

“Coolio, then. Keep a gauntlet handy in case.”

“What you did there,” he said, eyes narrow, “I saw it. Bad, bad pun. Good for you.”

“Obviously Bruce is going,” Jemma said, “but I don’t see how we fit in,” she finished, gesturing to the three relative newcomers.

“Gemstone, you are my biggest secret weapon,” Darcy said with a wicked smile, “and I have assassins.”

“Gem… stone?”
“Do you not like it? It’s just, we shouldn’t use Flemming in the field, I need to have you and Fitz mobile and spreadable in patterns. Your name starts with j-e-m, and that’s close to gem, and you really are tough and sharp like a diamond, or a lab beryl of some kind. We can alter…” She cut off as Jemma tackle hugged her.

“Do I want to know what ye named us?” Fitz asked her hesitantly in his light brogue.

“Skye already agreed to Quake. Only her brother would know why. With Gemstone and the D.W.A.R.F.s I was tempted to make you Snow White, but I thought you’d probably kill me in ways undetectable to modern science. So I fiddled with the idea, and… how do you like Snowstorm? You will be running interference....”

Fitz smiled at the pun. “Where do ye want us Swapper?”

Darcy grinned back at her friends. “Quake has the diner a block from the apartment one way and a block from the meeting spot in the other, I want you monitoring not just feeds to help blip the video when Betty gets near, but also the street. If she makes a break, I want to know where.”

“Got it,” Skye said. “They have wi-fi, yes?”

“What am I, an animal? Do they have wi-fi… sheesh, yes. Gemstone, you and Snowstorm will take rooftop positions on these buildings,” she said pointing to a map on her Starkpad before flicking the hologram map out to each of them. “I want full, rotating D.W.A.R.F. surveillance in a 5.5 meter radius around Doctor Ross. Anything, and I mean anything, looks hinky, you call it in. You’ve got the stealth mode built in, right?”

“That we do,” Jemma said. “We’ll drive with Quake. I can’t wait to talk to the Doctor Elizabeth Ross! She revolutionized bio-chemical organic radiation studies.”

Soon only Thor and her stay behind team was in the room.

“What would you have me do, Lightning Sister?” he said, bowing graciously to her control of the op.

“You are not great at undercover, sad to say. No amount of Clark Kent-ing you will hide who you are. But I could use someone in reserve to do something big and flashy if we need cover for the exfiltration, and I just so happen to have a brother who is very good at big and flashy. Are you willing to be our cover if we need it?”

“Of course, I have heard of the great trials Siedkonur Ross has suffered from her sire. I’ll admit, I seem to find a certain kinship of his misdeeds and those of my family when Loki showed signs of siedr. If I can protect her now, perhaps my heart will bear less of the weight of my own guilt for our brother’s mistreatment. He always accused me of being as large and obnoxious as a Bilgesnipe, I can finally put that to use.”

“Good,” she nodded. “Behind team, you know your roles, let’s go.”

Steve had thought Natasha was crazy when she put him in a bright blue hoodie with an over jacket of drab olive brown and a black baseball cap and glasses as a disguise, until he saw Bucky. His lover had tied his hair back and tucked it in his own charcoal gray cap and shrugged on the same color denim jacket. Steve knew what Nat had been going for. People notice Captain America and the Winter Soldier. Those were icons. Stevie Rogers and his friend Buck from Brooklyn… nobody cared. Those were people. He could see it in how Bucky stood, nowhere near military precision,
the loose, relaxed jerk from the 30’s done up in the clothes of now. His own baggy layers de-emphasized his muscle, and the glasses hinted at physical impairment. She couldn’t make him smaller, but she could make him a little more like he had been. He hooked his hand in Bucky’s and let him take them on the bike.

Darcy relayed directions, and Bucky followed them, mostly. He did loop a few blocks, and circled wide to enter the other parking lot for the park, away from the playground they were going to be meeting Betty at. They walked around, holding hands and looking for all the world like two dopes in love. Darcy had said once; the best disguise isn’t. Now he knew she was right. He pulled out the earbud cord from his iPod that was hooked into their coms, and gave Bucky one, like he’d seen couples do at the mall and during the tie shopping trip.

“Alright, Scrapper, Snapper, you in position yet?” Darcy said on the line. Steve adjusted the bud, short, long. Morse code for A, for Affirmative. “Good, Quake, I’m sending the text now, she’s the third floor up, front middle window, nearest fire exit should be in your line of sight.”

“She’s coming out of the building,” Skye reported calmly. “Alright, looking left, looking right, damn. Gemstone, Snowstorm, be advised she is heading south, I repeat, south.”

“Copy that, Quake, we’ve got her,” Jemma soothed

“Hourglass just intercepted a Squid.” Clint said. “Please advise.”

“Try not to die Churchill,” Darcy told him. “I need eyes people.”

“I’ve got her,” Tony said. “She’s not running, she’s checking for tails. Peeling off now.”

“Copy that, Winterfell,” Fitz said on the coms. “Cross the street, Sneezy has increased aggression hormones a bit ahead of her.”

“On it. Hey there, nasty.” The sound of the miniature repulsor firing rang through the coms.

“Swapper, be advised, Bombshell is entering the park.”

“Roger dodger,” Darcy said. “Commence Operation Hallmark Moment.”

<> Bucky felt for Doctor Ross. She’d been through a lot, and that she was even trying to get to a meeting with Bruce arranged by a burner phone to a number that wasn’t listed said she’d survived it intact. Paranoid and intact, but in this case, that paranoia was prudent. He gently lead Steve across a bridge over a rain gully filled with blue rocks to mimic a stream. Most of the park was like that, acting like a standard park with changes to fit the climate.

The couple spent some time admiring a fenced off cacti grove, ears solidly on the other side of it, where Darcy and Bruce were sitting in the playground. Bruce had taken a seat on a bench and Darcy had disappeared under the play equipment so thoroughly, that even though she’d told them all where she would be, he couldn’t spot her.

“Bruce?” said the woman in the blonde wig. It was a good wig, but you did not train with Red Room and not spot a wig.

“Betty, hey, you changed your hair.”

“We’re on the run from my madman paternal bio-donor, you outed yourself on TV, and you want to
talk about my hair? Who’s holding you? Who sent that text? What leverage are they using?"

“Swapper, be advised, Mission Objective is going Minsk,” Bucky said into Steve’s shirt collar.

“Understood. All cards get ready to be laid on the table.” A small shadow moved under the net bridge. “Swapper, entering field.” Darcy, in a baggy knit sweater that did not belong in mid-afternoon Nevada and cargo pants, unfolded and slid up to Betty.

“Betty,” Bruce said calmly, “Meet Darcy. The answers would be nobody, her, and freedom. Darcy helps me, she helps Him. That was a short list that is getting longer because of her.”

“I don’t know what malarkey you got him to believe, but I’m not falling for it,” Betty said, drawing a taser.

“Oh, Honey, we have got to upgrade you.” Darcy lifted a wrist and spoke into the com.

“Hourglass, who did your Bites? I’m looking at the saddest taser right now, we need to go shopping.”

“Someone in R and D, I don’t know who, they were prototypes when I stole them.” A wet thud.

“Where are we dumping bodies?”

“What is this, amateur hour? I raised you better than that, clean up your own messes Hourglass, or no desert.”

“Don’t worry, Swaps, I’ll pimp her taser in no time,” Tony said on the line. “But we should move, plain-clothes army units just came as back-ups. Why do they not even bother to walk like civilians?”

“They signed with Ross, Winterfell, do they need another reason to be stupid? Say thanks to the Greatly Bumbling One, God of Imperial Stormtroopers, and haul ass,” Darcy demanded. “Initiate Hammertime.” A crack of lightning hit the sky and Bucky moved to cover the rear of the diamond formation, Steve at the front, Darcy and Bruce, soon joined by Tony, on the other side. Clint and Natasha fell in and they were fully circled around Doctor Ross by the time Skye pulled her van up and they piled in the back.

“Where are the others?” he asked his sister.

“With Byz, lucky little sneaks. He hot-wired a bus. So not fair, and hands off the Fruity Pebbles! God, it’s like Matty, only you like my food.”

“Sorry sis,” he said, not sorry at all.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Callsign- another word for code name.
Crossbones- Rumlow’s code name within HERO
Hacks- slang for people who are bad at a job.
Loons- 30’s and 40’s slang for crazy people.
Fleming- short for Fleming77, FitzSimmons combined online identity.
Lab beryl- a precious stone in the beryl family (ruby, sapphire, emerald) used to cut tough material or focus laser beams. Not as flashy as their jewelry cousins, but very
durable and useful.
Snowstorm- a nickname for the static interference on old TVs, more used in the UK than in America.
Exfiltration- removing someone surreptitiously, the opposite side of infiltration.
Bilgesnipe- referenced in The Avengers as being large, aggressive and repulsive.
Morse code- the dot and dash code used by telegraph offices, and later in the war.
Bites- short for Widow's Bites, the electric stun weapons used by Natasha.

Code Names: (these are different since it's not a publicly known Avengers mission.)
Swapper- Darcy
Scrapper- Steve
Snapper- Bucky
Quake- Skye
Gemstone- Jemma
Snowstorm- Fitz
Hourglass- Natasha
Churchill- Clint
Winterfell- Tony
Bombshell- Betty

Notes:
Good paperwork saves time, money, and in this case lives.

Body profiles and gait samples (the way someone walks) are alternate ways of identifying people. Makeup and wigs can fool facial recognition programs, but you have to be really dedicated to change a body profile and gait to escape detection. The legality of these programs is questionable, but this is done by hackers, not cops in this case.

Yes, I reference Big Jim's Big Day(s) here.

Tony shows far more blacksmithing competence than ordinary in Iron Man. He probably has a mastery if he's producing hand-forged stuff that good, and there's no canon mention of him learning that. Thus the undercover gag.

Quake is Skye (Daisy Johnson's) superhero name in both the comics and the Agents of SHIELD TV show, but in this case was not chosen for her earthquake powers, but for how Matt Murdock described her angry heartbeat once as children in St. Agnes Orphanage.

The D.W.A.R.F.s are a set of drones designed to remotely collect forensic evidence designed by Fitz and Simmons. They have names corresponding to their tasks, and Simmons at one point said one is basically just sniffing things.

5.5 meters would be enough of a radius to cover an entire street width in most small American towns. For standard users, it's about 18 feet.

Steve and Bucky are wearing their under-cover outfits from Winter Soldier. Normalizing is a great way to disguise, which is how celebrities can go anywhere nearly undetected with cheap shades and a ball-cap.

Desert climates can't grow standard park plants without very wasteful watering, so parks in those areas sometimes use creative hardscaping with colored rocks or other optical tricks to mimic a typical park.
Bucky saying the objective is going Minsk is reference to a mission they did together that went sideways. Much like the very contested "Budapest" lines in The Avengers, it's an in-joke, I figure Nat got that tendency somewhere and the Red Room wasn't the most humorous.

The Imperial Stormtroopers are well known in the Star Wars fandom for not being at all good at their jobs.

Teaser:

“THEY HAVE ROCKETS? NOBODY SAID ANYTHING ABOUT ROCKETS!”
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Darcy explains, disrupts an attack, and does something insane.

Steve tells off a General, re-affirms his position on Ross the Elder, and sees his lovers crazy side.

Bucky helps Darcy, muses on their past, and learns what Phil considers up-cycling.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To quadrad, Sergeant_Disaster, Beth_Mac, Notashamed, Joey99, Darylslover33, Jade01, Shadows_of_Shemai, SionnachOiche3, psyche29, Selene_Aduial and the two new kudo-ers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“From the top,” directed Betty. Darcy nodded. She had pretty much kidnapped the woman, good intentions or no. Doctor Ross deserved answers.

“I’m Darcy Lewis, also called The Lieu, and by certain nonagenarian assholes of my acquaintance, Lieutenant Liberty. Next to me are Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes, aka Captain America and Winter Soldier. The scruffy nerf herder on your right is a cleverly disguised Tony Stark, he who does not do with the secret identity gag. Nat’s the red-head with blood on her forehead, oh that is going to drive me insane, lean over.”

Natasha leaned across the van while Darcy used a wet nap on her bloodied head. None of it was hers, thankfully.

“I’m Clint,” the archer picked up seamlessly. “Nat and I were spies and assassins for SHIELD until Lieu brought us into the Avengers. She’s Nat’s mom, basically, and where Nat goes, I go. Skye’s our driver and Bucky’s sister, and you already know Bruce. When Darcy’s people caught video of you, she put us on the SCE for you, since Bruce isn’t really that great without you. He’s good people, don’t get me wrong, but he mopes.”

“SCE?” Betty asked.

“Surveil, Contact, and Exfiltrate,” Darcy said, content with Nat’s level of cleanliness. “We watched to be sure contacting you was safe, for both you and Bruce. Then we contacted you to see how you felt about being relocated somewhere safer, and the plan was to wait until you said yes, but… Tony? Why exactly were we forced to move to plan B?”

“Soldiers, maybe fifty or so. They came in on a tour bus and were dressed the part, but I sold weapons, I’ve known soldiers of all types, and all soldiers walk a certain way unless they try not to, and they weren’t ours, so I assumed they were Ross’s. The other Ross, not Doctor Ross. The Ross
Steve promised to punch out on camera.”

“You promised to hit my father on camera?” Betty asked Steve. Darcy quickly leaned protectively across his body. “Oh don’t be silly, I hate that man, I was going to say I could kiss him for that.”

Darcy let the tension out, then processed the words. “No, mine. I got here first. Well, Bucky did, but we’re a triad, so it doesn’t count. Keep your own serum boy toy, these are mine.”

“Angel, you’re acting a little Jane right now,” Steve told her. “Are you alright?”

“She’s really freaking pretty and I’m a hot mess,” Darcy mumbled.

“Doll, I have had a pants busting crush since I was 18 on you,” Bucky rumbled as he pulled her into his lap. “You have to work a lot harder than waving a pretty face at me, or Steve for that matter, to get us to ditch our best girl. Steve lived with an internationally acclaimed chorus line, and I did missions with Russian supermodels. We love you. Who you are, in here,” he touched her chest before tapping her head, “and in here. Stevie tries to sneak around on us, I’ll punch him myself. With the metal one.”

Darcy nodded into his chest as Steve rubbed soothing circles on her back.

“Wow, you are a hot mess,” Betty said. “I’m officially accepting all the other crazy on faith. If somebody with skills and a body like you gets freaked out over losing her man, then formerly dead WWII heroes, spies, assassins, super hero moguls and a woman who keeps Fruity Pebbles in stock in her van slash apartment are not the strangest things I’ve seen today.”

“Fruity Pebbles are not that strange,” Skye said defensively.

“No, but you knew exactly what he was reaching for before he even got to it. The van looks like a mess, but I bet you could lay hands on everything back here before someone finished listing it. That sort of method in the madness is something I only see on my super-genius doctoral students.”

“Fair. I’m a high-school dropout, but I do have a GED. My brother would have been disappointed. Not Bucky, my other brother.”

“Lemme guess, Daryl?” Betty said dryly and Tony burst out into wheezing laughter.

“No, Matty. My brother from the orphanage.”

“Sibs from different cribs are a family specialty,” Darcy explained as Skye swerved wildly and the van rocked with a boom.

“THEY HAVE ROCKETS? NOBODY SAID ANYTHING ABOUT ROCKETS!” Skye screeched.

“Bruce, stay here and cover Betty, Hulk, get her and Skye out if it comes to it. Nat, you help Clint get to the roof and the two of you focus high, Steve, you and Tony do a tuck and roll and clear out the ground. Skye, I need an Ivan, crazier the better.” Bruce immediately covered Betty with his body as Nat and Clint opened the door and flipped onto the roof of the van. As Skye pulled into a sharp U-turn that became doughnuts on the highway, Steve and Tony went diving free in seemingly random directions. “Ready to do something really dumb?” she asked Bucky.

“Vsegda,” he said with a grin.

“Okay then, feel like a game of Play-Dangle?”
“Not sure Ross will fall for it.”

“He thinks Hulk is a monster, the man believes what he sees.”

“Just don’t think he’d care.”

“He will, Betty toss me your wig.”

Steve hit the ground rolling and came up firing. He might not like guns as much as his shield, but he could use them and the sudden appearance of a well-known war hero firing at them made a few troops stop out of pure moral confusion. He and Tony took them out fast with the modified Night Night guns they were both carrying. The ones who kept coming found out what happened when you trained an already torso strong man who forged iron by hand in Hitting 101. He didn’t need the suit to send them flying into each other. A few men fell from hovering jets, one jet hit the ground in flame. He and Tony wordlessly agreed to fish out survivors.

“What in the hell?” Tony asked. Steve was about to remind him about the language thing when the tech genius pointed. Steve turned to see the van had stopped doing spirals on the pavement and was facing the attacking forces. Also, Darcy was doing a behind the head pull-up on a steady arm, Doctor Ross’s blond wig dislodged and covering most of her face. With the bulky sweater stripped off and replaced with Doctor Ross’s leather jacket over a compression tee, she looked a little like Betty. And from the angle of the incoming soldiers, it would look like she was being held out of the van by her neck. She was squirming enough to look painful, but he could see her tendons flexing as she held herself stable. The charcoal coat disguised whose arm it was, so Steve drew a logical conclusion. A crazy one, but it was still logical.

“Darcy has a plan,” he told Tony. “A plan that’s not fully baked, and I intend to have words over it with her, but not now. Now, we help her. Can Mister Roboto hook my com into the lead chopper?”

“Of course,” Tony said and Steve heard the crackle-hiss of an open line. “Your voice is modulated. Speak when ready.”

“Ross, I would advise you to call off your men. I don’t think you want tomorrow’s headlines reading General in Army Shoots Own Daughter, or even Renowned Scientist Dead In Tragic Military Action.”

“Who the hell is this and where do you get off threatening me?”

“Wow, you are a monster,” Steve said in shock. He’d heard the stories, but he knew Bruce was a biased source. A biased, totally accurate source. “You might be about to kill your own child and you think I’m threatening you? I’ll tell you who I am, I’m the line in the sand that you don’t want to cross, I’m the tree by the river of Truth saying ‘No, you move’, and I’m the back-alley scrapper who always, always gets back up to try again. I’m the guy who doesn’t like bullies, no matter where they’re from, and I will stop you. I could do this all day, Ross. You don’t stand a chance. Give up before this gets embarrassing.”

“You won’t get away with this,” the General grumbled as Clint and Nat climbed in past the struggling ‘Betty’ and Tony dropped the last survivor five feet from the flaming wreck.

“I think I just did. I look forward to seeing you in person, Ross,” Steve smirked up at the chopper as he pointedly turned his back in dismissal. “That’s one publicized punch I’m going to enjoy.”
He turned off his com and hopped in beside Darcy, who was fixing her hair from the wig mess.

“Home?” she asked.

“Home,” he agreed. “We’re gonna talk about you doing pull-ups in the line of fire with obscured vision, you know.”

“Yeah, but we will do it over pot-roast.”

“You three will do it after pot-roast,” Bruce chided. “Clint and I worked hard on that and we will not be having emotionally charged work discussions over dinner.”

“It’s your own rule, Darcy,” Clint chimed in. Darcy stuck her tongue out at him.

Steve smiled at his family. They did the dangerous, crazy, outside chance work, and then they turned to each other for a feeling of safety, even in teasing. It was like pressing a safety rail to see if it would hold. And the Avengers always held.

<>

Bucky worked to keep the manic grin inside him from reaching his face when Doctor Ross let out a tiny shriek as the van came to a stop and Darcy let him thrust her out of the door with one arm. It was funny, but only to someone who knew Darcy could have taken him apart in seconds if she really wanted to, dangling out the door or not. In fact, it was her arms, not his, that held her weight. His hand was only there for supporting her head and giving her a good grip spot.

They’d practiced this move with Natalia when she was a child, pretending to dangle her in the air. Red Room training practices made it harder than it should be, holding her over the edge of tall buildings, over drops into flame or icy water, when she had just woken and when she was falling asleep on her feet. They had all three known those parts were wrong, but that didn’t stop Play-Dangling from becoming a favorite game. A game that became all too real in Dubai, on top of a skyscraper, as part of the extraction of Black Widow from her place beside an American oil baron. Talia had been wearing a glide suit when she let go of his arm, and suffered only minor bruising, but they hadn’t done it for fun after. He’d never done it with Darcy at the end of his arm. He kind of liked it. She trusted him to keep his arm steady, even as she pretended to struggle. In turn, he trusted her to hold herself safely. He liked the shared trust the fake out required.

He listened to Steve’s modulated, computerized voice on the coms dressing down a General, and it wasn’t lost that the only time Steve used the title was when talking about headlines. Steve could be very respectful, he respected almost everyone in the sense of acting like they were decent and valuable human beings, and his exceptions had already proven they weren’t. He could also respect people in authority, he and Philips had butted heads a lot, but unless Philips broke the cardinal rule of being Steve’s boss, Steve could toe the line.

Ross had broken that cardinal rule. He treated others without the respect due a decent and valuable human being without provocation. Bucky knew in Steve’s book, that made him a failure as an authority. At least Philips had always tried to repair what he’d sent wrong, and sometimes, he broke the Rule because he knew Steve wanted to do something he couldn’t give an okay for, like saving the core Howlies and the other men. It was sneaky, but it appealed to both Bucky and Steve’s sense of rule-bending mischief.

He also knew Steve was serious about talking with them about the Play-Dangle, and he could see why in how close Steve held Darcy on the ride home. She barely moved from his lap until they were pulling into the bunker’s garage beside a large, gaudy bus.
“The hell is that?” he asked as Phil stepped forward to help them get out and subtly check for injuries.

“I believe when you take something discarded and ill-suited for its task and make it into something better, it’s called up-cycling,” Phil said calmly.

“Jarvis, you did check it, right?” Tony asked as he pulled off his hat and ran his gauntlet free hand through his hair. “I don’t trust anything save Doctor Ross that came from that absolute hackweasel of a General.”

“Of course I did Sir,” Jarvis said, slightly offended. “Aside from three phones I began blocking when Agents Coulson, Simmons, and Fitz boarded, there are no trackers, and now all three phones are in Faraday lock-up in the fifth sub-basement lab, pending review.”

“Fantastic,” Bruce said, brushing by them with Betty holding his hand. “Betty, that’s Jarvis, he’s a nice AI who helps us out. And this is Phil, he keeps the squishies from being too badly hurt for Simmons to fix. She’s a bio-chemist, but she’s also pretty good at medic work. I’m sure you’ll meet her at dinner, I’m starving.”

Steve and Bucky’s stomachs let out identical growls, followed by a softer gurgle from Talia.

“The metabolisms have spoken,” Darcy said. “Is my brother in yet?”

“No, Prince Thor is still in the field. He seems to have taken a dislike to someone so…” Jarvis hesitated, “incompetent, taking the name Thunderbolt.”

“Why do I feel like incompetent was not the word used and I’m going to be playing Rubik’s Brain on him later?”

“Because you are remarkably perceptive, Miss Lewis,” Jarvis said, “Dinner is ready.” And that ended that for the moment.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Nonagenarian- in their nineties.
Acting a little Jane- Jane in my canon has Autism Spectrum Disorder, but neuro-typical people can have similar reactions to autistic ones in the right (or wrong) headspace. That’s what this means here.
Crazy Ivan- Better known from Firefly, a sharp u-turn was called a 'crazy Ivan' because Russian submarine captains used it to avoid being broadside to enemy torpedoes.
Vsegda- always (Russian)
Night Night guns- a knockout gun.
Not fully baked- sort of insane.
Mister Roboto- Jarvis’ code name in the field.
Chopper- helicopter.
Talia- one of Bucky and Darcy's familiar names for Natasha.
Glide suit- a body suit with panels similar to the ‘wingflaps’ of a flying squirrel, used to slow falls. NOT as safe as a parachute, but less noticeable.
Hackweasel- incompetent and untrustworthy. Tony is experimenting with cussing without cussing for Steve.
Squishies- adopted gaming slang, the combatants more likely to suffer injury.

Notes:
The phrase 'scruffy nerf herder' comes from Star Wars, used to insultingly describe Han Solo.

People who fight for a living develop a certain muscle memory for how to move. Unless you actively avoid it, your walk will tell an informed observer what fighting style you favor, in this case that they are soldiers. A really good observer can also pinpoint origin of soldier and level of competence from watching but that's not Tony's specialty.

Darcy has some bad tape about herself, so sometimes she gets jealous of the boys. They think it's silly, because they love her and if they wanted a different woman had plenty of chances at it, but logic has nothing to do with it.

Method in the madness is a form of organization that looks hyper-disorganized, but enables the user to access anything quickly. It's not useful until you start tipping into genius level IQ's. Skye is more of a super-genius which makes the mess-as-design much easier for her to use than compulsive order.

"My other brother Daryl." is a line from an old comedy show I have forgotten the name of. The gag was "This is my brother Daryl, and that's my other brother Daryl." I'm pegging Betty as an old TV show girl and Tony is the oldest human Avenger.

Please do not anger a blacksmith enough that they hit you. Even mild training turns those muscles into weapons. Blacksmiths take "suns out, guns out" a bit literally, their arms are scary.

The Play-Dangle as described here is a theatrical method. I've used it, it's not hard on a stage, but I would imagine the added factor of a moving car would be an unnecessary complication.

Steve gave the iconic 'no, you move' speech to Spiderman in the comics, here's a link: https://scans-daily.dreamwidth.org/428954.html

Although the Play-Dangle is perfectly safe in a controlled environment with people who know what they're doing, that is not how the Red Room planned on it ever being used, so their training was very unsafe and morally wrong. It is possible to find joy in things even in the darkest times, though, which is why those cherished family things stuck with Bucky.

There are two meanings to "respecting someone" one is to treat them with basic human decency, the other is to treat them like an authority. Often abusers will use "If you won't respect me, I won't respect you" as a tool to trap their victims, but that use means "If you won't treat me like an authority, I won't treat you like a person." Which is bull. Steve uses "If a boss will not treat others like humans, I won't treat them as authorities." Which can cause friction, but is more moral. Philips understood that and used it to give tacit and deniable permission to Steve in the War because he was a good officer, Ross just doesn't get it at all, because he is the worst of all possible officers in the Marvel Canon I could find.

Up-cycling is commonly used on junk or damaged goods. In this case, Phil is being low-key funny/insulting about stealing Ross's bus.
Rubik's Cube is a puzzle considered difficult based around lining the colors up to get solid sides. Rubik's Brain is a way of conveying putting a person's psyche back together in a way that makes sense after they lose touch with their normal.

Teaser:

“Children, plural?”
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Darcy helps Thor with his mental issues.

Steve helps Bucky and Darcy with theirs.

Bucky just thinks Hydra's are funny.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To quadrad, Maharet, Snowecat, Notashamed, halfelf87, Darylslover33, Shadows_of_Shemai, Joey99, psyche29, Beth_Mac, Selene_Aduial, ElisaC, rosiedeplume, sara47q, ValkyriePhoenix, and SionnachOiche3.

Posting a touch early, I need to get to sleep soon.

Steve had kindly let her off the talking to after dinner when Thor came in mid meal and promptly sat beside Jane on the floor, laying his head on her knee. Darcy was grateful for that as she and Jane got him to at least talk a bit. Fighting on Doctor Ross’s behalf had brought up a lot of conflicted feelings in her brother, Darcy noticed. He and Loki had always, in her knowledge, had very different ideas about what had happened with them growing up. The basic facts were the same, but prior to his adoption of her, Thor had been pretty content in his Golden Child role, and never noticed Loki becoming Odin’s Scapegoat. It bothered him how much damage he had been encouraged to do to their brother, and how little he’d noticed until afterwards.

“Thor, here on Midgard, we like to say, hindsight is 20/20,” she said in a break of his self-recriminations. “It means you always see better looking backwards at the past than you ever will looking at the future or the now. You’re seeing with better clarity what Loki was trying to tell you before. That’s progress, it means you can use it to look at the now and decide what you really want. I don’t believe you want to hurt our Shadow Brother, do you?”

“Nay, I never did. I simply did not see that I was. How can you wound someone’s soul and not notice? What sort of vile creature does not see the damage he’s doing to his own brother?”

“Do you remember, after the Battle,” Jane added absently. “Tony was walking a little off, and Bruce noticed, and there was that huge fight?”

“The Man of Iron had been injured in the battle’s fray, and did not wish to worry us. He has fought long alone, and is unused to the care of shield-kin,” Thor said.

“No,” Jane shook her head. “He’d been hurt because he was falling too fast to be safely caught when Hulk grabbed him. Hulk had tried his best not to hurt him, because Tony was a friend, but it’s just not possible to fully protect someone falling at terminal velocity. That he wasn't killed or
paralyzed is a testament to how good Hulk’s catch and brake was. But he knew how Bruce thought about Hulk. We all did, it’s hard not to notice when someone hates someone else that loudly. And he knew how Bruce would, and actually did, react to hearing Tony was hurt when Hulk grabbed him.”

“He reacted badly, as I recall,” Thor said. “He yet thought of friend Hulk as a monster, and bore guilt that was not his with alarming readiness and tenacity.”

“Exactly,” Jane said. “And what does Tony call Bruce?”

Darcy blinked. How had she not seen it? She’d already said it, sibs from different cribs are a family specialty. “Thor,” she said, sure her face had gone pale. “Tony calls Bruce his Science Bro, his *Brother of Science*. Tony didn’t hide the injury because he wasn’t used to us, he hid it because he didn’t want his brother to feel bad about hurting him, even if it was an accident, or unavoidable, and not Bruce’s fault. He hid it because *he loves his brother*. And Tony is a fucking horrible liar, once you get under the playboy mask. He’s lied to people he let know him a grand total of once in his life, and BOTH of them knew he was lying, even if they didn’t know about what. Loki, on the other hand….”

“Has ever had a distracting silver tongue and a way of telling half-truths that lead to an inaccurate end,” Thor finished.

“The best lies aren’t,” Darcy nodded. “Jane, you’re a genius. Thor, you didn’t know you were hurting Loki as a kid, because Loki didn’t *let* you know. He loved his brother and knew you’d do what you’re doing now, which is upsetting to me, and given the gap of how long he’s been your brother and how long I’ve been your sister, would be even worse for him. Loki lied about his injuries, just like Tony, only he’s better at it.”

“Until the strain of such damage and no proper care for it gave way,” Thor nodded. “When he discovered his parentage…”

“He snapped, all the fractures added up and he had no fucking clue what he was doing, except trying to get the *one person* who could have helped him to see the truth about what had happened. What that person had *let* happen.”

“Odin,” Thor nodded.

“No offence, Thor, but I kinda hate your dad right now. How did he think that would play out any way *but* Loki losing it?”

“The All-Father indeed has much to answer for.”

“He’s not answering anything tonight,” Jane interrupted. “Tonight we focus on the solvable equations. Darcy plus shower plus sleep equals happier Darcy. Thor plus shower plus sleep equals happier Thor. When we get back to Loki we can figure out how to solve for happier Loki. We don’t worry about solving for Odin until later. Order of operations.”

“Never change, Janey,” Darcy said, kissing her best friend on the head as she stood up. “Best of us all, and I include my Star Spangled Man in that. Love you both, and now, shower.” Thor nodded and walked with Jane to her room as Darcy headed for the showers.

<^> Steve scooped Darcy into his arms as she left the shower room and carried her to their room. She didn’t protest at all, so he prepared to go a little easier on her when they talked about how insane the
stunt they pulled was. Instead, when he set her on their bed, she and Bucky held hands, flesh and metal as they told him together about learning that trick. About how close Natasha, their daughter in all but blood, had come to dying with it. How that had been a game. They’d told a little girl it was a game, because the truth was too awful, and sooner or later the lie about a game became a truth.

“So many things we did, we lied about,” Darcy said, her face blank as Bucky rubbed her hand. “We lied to the Red Room and Hydra when we did good things, we lied to ourselves when we did bad things. Our lives were lies told between brief gasps of free air. Sometimes… sometimes I don’t think I’d know what truth was without our team. Without Jane, and you, and all the Avengers, and our friends. I don’t think I’d be any better than the Red Room wanted us to be. There was so much darkness there.”

“Hey,” Bucky interrupted her, moving her face to look into his. “There was darkness, but there was light, too. There was Natka, and we got to watch her grow up into a wonderful, beautiful woman. We had each other, we had our children, we had our mission. We had a strength they could never break.”

“Yeah, we did,” Darcy sighed, and Steve tried to process all of this.

“Children, plural?” was what came out.

“Natka was one of twenty eight in her year,” Bucky explained. “Lena was too… but that did not end well, she took my role as a father… poorly as she matured. Katenka was good with tech, Darcy helped her more than I did. I was more of Marishka’s tutor, nice aim there. Valya, Galina, Nika, Brina, Vika, there were many we taught. Not all of them made the final roster.”

“They… died?” Steve asked, horrified.

“That is a very flexible word for us, Steve,” Darcy told him. “We killed them as far as the Red Room needed us to, to prove our loyalty. But they’re about as dead as Dugan. Give us some credit, we weren’t going to kill our own kids.”

“They made you… I can’t handle this.”

“Play-Dangling doesn’t seem so insane now, does it?” Darcy asked with a rueful smile. “It’s pretty tame compared to what we were ordered to do, and we trained in it. I know his strength, it was mine too. He knows I taught our daughters to get the best grip, fake the best struggle. I trusted him and he trusted me. I like that trust, Steve. It was one of the only honest things we got to keep, since they didn’t know.”

“Don’t ask us to give it up,” Bucky asked him, eyes on the floor.

“God, no. Never,” Steve swore. “You need it, so you keep it. Just, try to warn me next time. I almost flubbed the line I fed Ross because I was worried.”

“Okay, we can do that, Punk,” Bucky said, eyes lifting. “What do you need now?”

“Just to hold you both.”

So they changed into pajamas and curled around him, and Steve wrapped his strong arms around his loves and prayed silently.

St. Michael, defender of man, stand with us in the day of battle. St. Jude, giver of hope, be with us in our desperate hour. St. Christopher, bearer of burdens, lift us when we fall.
Bucky watched as the team really coalesced, the final missions going off so well all he was needed for was mop-up. He enjoyed carving words he’d heard and, as far as Hydra knew, shouldn’t remember, into walls and doors. A neat little calling card for an imperfect soldier to leave to people who tried to make him the perfect weapon. They thought, according to Darcy’s sources, he was remembering slowly, regaining who he was. They’d tried three times that the undercover agents of HERO knew, to detonate his arm. The bomb was still safely in a cage that blocked the signal, but the many heads of Hydra didn’t know his family had removed it, or even that he knew what it was.

He remembered Darcy talking about winning her State Judo championship at eighteen. “I love it when they underestimate me,” she’d said. “It makes the look on their faces that much better when I have them kissing the mat.”

She was right, it felt good to know he was better than Hydra could ever have dreamed, and he wasn’t on their side. He never had been. Each safe house made unsafe, each lab marked with words of scientists who hurt him, and he gave them the pieces of a puzzle he knew they were unwilling to put together.

All things end, though, and soon Darcy got the all-clear. The devastating cyber-attack had infected the hidden mainframes of the Hydra agents within intelligence agencies foreign and domestic, within the world’s armed forces and the governments, wiped their computers with swift, brutal efficiency, and dumped the more embarrassing secrets of individuals on the internet for all to see. Fury was using the mass exposure to trim the fat, and former tumors in SHIELD were dropping into an obscurity made worse by further fouling of bank systems, internet footprints, and the DMV. A goodly chunk were forced back into the unforgiving arms of Pierce, the Not-Steve. Bucky sat beside his sister on the road home, listening to her explain what she and her cohorts had done.

“Good job, Sis. You’re a real Barnes, you are, wreaking havoc and confusion.”

“Cry havoc,” Skye said with a serious face, “and let slip the Barnes of War.”

Bucky burst out laughing.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Golden Child- the child who is given excessive favor in the Golden Child/Scapegoat abusive parent dynamic.
Order of operations- the order of steps in solving a complex mathematical equation.
Dead as Dugan- Dum-Dum Dugan had his death faked in Bodies in Time, he's still alive, just not officially.
Kissing the mat- facedown on the floor in a sparring match, an implied final loss.
Trim the fat- to remove excess, or fire an employee who's hurting the overall organization.

Notes:
In many cases of child abuse, the abuser manipulates one child into harming another. One method is to absolve the child pushed to harm, and blame the one getting hurt. This is incredibly scarring to both children, and learning as an adult that you were in the Golden Child role can be traumatic. It's a form of moral injury, where the normal moral
code that should exist is broken to elicit certain responses.

It isn't super often, but sometimes people on the Autism Spectrum make connections that seem random because they can't articulate why the connection matters. The only times I've seen that, it hit the other people around like a hammer to the gut because the answer was /so obvious/ once it was pointed out.

Fictive kin, family formed by choice not blood, often have special ways of talking about each other. Darcy flat out calls Thor and Loki her brothers, but Tony is emotionally reserved and hesitant, so using a nickname that could easily be dismissed to express familial love for a non-genetic brother is more his style.

The time referenced is when Tony lied to Pepper and Rhodey about the Palladium poisoning.

The best lie isn't one of the cardinal rules of undercover work. The less you have to remember about a lie, the easier it is to fool someone into believing it.

Jane makes the smart call. Being mad at someone you can't confront uses resources better spent on moving in the direction you want to go.

Canonically, the Red Room trained multiple children as Widows, eliminating the ones who failed until one remained to take the mantle. Natasha Romanov was one of 28. When she defected Yelena Belova took the name and role, despite having been a close runner up to Natasha. That's part of why there was so much hatred there. In my canon, Yelena also developed an unhealthy romantic obsession with her trainer, Bucky. Bucky and Darcy saw her as their child, as they did all the girls, but Natasha accepted that form of love and Yelena couldn't. Hence grudge.

I borrowed a lot of names from GalahadsGurl's fic The Grimm Truth for the kids Bucky and Darcy taught. Go read it, it's amazing.

Steve's prayer is borrowed from Marion G Harmon's Wearing the Cape series, there called the Unattributed Prayer for Heroes. Both Steve and Hope, the protagonist of that series, are devout Catholics.

There is a lot of power in being underestimated. There's also a level of power in looking and acting submissive. Bucky is enjoying the fruits of both as he becomes Hydra's own personal closet monster.

Cyber attacks come in many forms, this one specifically reformatted the parts of drives solely for Hydra use in larger organizations, destroying data they needed, revealed personal secrets of known Hydra operatives, and removed their ability to get their lives pulled back together with removal from online databases. Being a ghost is good for hiding, bad for having your license checked or using your credit cards.

Skye is riffing on "Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of War" which I already think is hilarious as the only breed I know of specifically bred for war is the Chihuahua. Dogs were elsewhere used in war, but not bred to do just that, often they were hunting dogs that were retrained. Chihuahuas were bred exclusively to bite out the Achilles tendon of the enemy in Aztec battlegrounds.
Teaser:

“Steve said the first thing Darcy asked Bruce was if you were safe.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Darcy collects Loki, deals with her other family's drama, and negotiates a level of response.

Steve takes care of everyone's needs with the help of Jarvis, and considers something new about Tony.

Bucky explores, finds Doctor Ross and has a nice conversation about the qualities of air vents with Clint.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To phoenix_173, Sergeant_Disaster, Joey99, ValkyriePhoenix, queixo, quadrad, Beth_Mac, Notashamed, sara47q, Darylslover33, ElisaC, Shadows_of_Shemai, Selene_Aduial, BloodElf, Jade01, SionnachOiche3, and the 8 new kudo-ers.

Also, be aware you will need to read Loki and the Harrows from Out of Body Experience to get some of the things referenced.

Notes did not all fit below, so some are up here:
Translations:
Underhealer- Loki's way of saying nurse.
Master healer- Loki's way of saying medical doctor.
Do the do- have sex.
Talia- Darcy's familiar name for Natasha.
Shadow Brother/Sister- Darcy and Loki's names for each other.
Seidr- magic in Asgard.
Seidkonur- the feminine form for a magic user, adopted for use for non-medical doctors.
Homophile- the name for the queer rights activists immediately after WWII. (Warning: not politically correct anymore except in historical discussions of the era.)
Twink- effeminate gay man, at the time it was punk, the word changed, the meaning was the same.
A penny dropped- a sudden idea or realization occurred.
Nest- used by a sniper it means a place where easy access to things you need on a long assignment are easy to get without removing eyes from a target, as opposed to a perch, where you shoot from. For Clint it's a blanket fort.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy’s first order of business was collecting ‘Tony’ from SHIELD medical. Somehow entering a still and silent room to find her trickier brother sitting leaned against a wall reading a book and humming a song she didn’t know didn’t surprise her. The small pile of candy wrappers and the
white hook of a candy cane in the corner of his mouth did.

“Okay, so you like candy canes, good to know. Where did you get them?”

“I can explain,” Loki said, looking up a little guiltily.

“Can you clean up and get ready to be transferred back to the Tower first? I get a feeling that this story is going to require ice cream or popcorn. And we have plenty to tell you, obviously.”

“Yes, a few days ago there was quite a stir and one of the underhealers began hitting a master healer with one of those boards for paper. He did not take it well and was removed by guards.”

“Mm,” Darcy agreed as she helped him chase down cellophane. “I heard the attack uncovered medical impropriety here. Thankfully it wasn’t really a comatose Tony in here, I would have felt bad about that. You can take care of yourself, Tony… is getting better actually, but still… squishy human. Thank you for doing this.”

Loki nodded, and Darcy felt the slight release of a tension she hadn’t noticed as he slipped inside the perfect image of Tony. Figuring that meant he’d dropped what had kept outsiders from noticing him, she waved Thor and Steve in to collect him. They got back to the tower with little fuss, and she noted happily that Five didn’t have a medical squad anymore. And many more repairs had been made.

Tony had detoured to show Bruce, Skye, Simmons and Fitz the repaired lab, and Betty and Pepper had gone along as sanity control, since few of the science oriented types had much in the way of restraint. Clint and Natasha promptly disappeared, and Darcy smiled. Poor things hadn’t had much in the way of privacy in Nevada. Maybe she should feel different about her daughter going off to do the do, but she wanted Talia happy. If a crazy archer who liked purple a bit too much made her happy, Darcy wanted her to have him.

Steve, Bucky and Thor stayed with her as she had Phil unpack what had happened both in Nevada and in terms of Heracles Burn for them. Loki seemed pleased by the story of rescuing Betty. He seemed more like Steve had been about Play-Dangling.

“Is that safe for Midgardians?” he asked quietly. “You live so much shorter lives, I… worry, that you will end yours too soon. I still have much to learn.”

Darcy got the feeling the worry had nothing to do with learning.

“They explained it to me,” Steve said, sparing them from a repeat of the raw night they’d shared it all with him. “It’s not safe, but there isn’t much in the world that is, and they trusted each other enough to try it, and that’s worthwhile on its own.” He smiled at Bucky. “Some jerk who was too smart for his own good told me once, there’s a difference between surviving and living. Trust is of the living, and I’m too happy to have them living to be mad about it.”

“I wouldn’t worry about learning, Shadow Brother,” Darcy added, “you’re a fast study. You’ve already gone from denigrating the short life thing to worrying about it. That’s good and we weren’t even working on it.”

“You are no longer my only tutor, Shadow Sister,” he told her. “Two Midgardian youths have come to me for training in seidr, and I have been observing them as well. They show promise.”

“High praise indeed, coming from you, brother,” Thor said. “When we set to free Seidkonur Ross, I too learned some things. I must ask, for my own heart to find peace… Loki, my brother, did you lie to make me believe you uninjured in spirit as a child?”
Darcy could see the painful vulnerability in Thor’s eyes. She also saw Loki’s jaw twitch, trying to find the best words. But only honesty would let her help her brothers.

“Loki,” she said, laying a hand on his shoulder. “Any answer is acceptable, if it is honest. This is the hard part of what I do, what you have set to study in me. If you need it, I’m here for you. But I need you to answer this honestly.”

“I did,” he said, bowing his head. “I did not want you to think me weak.”

His breaking voice triggered something in Darcy. Something hard and angry, as implacable as an arctic glacier and vitriolic as poisons pumping in her heart.

“Oh, I am going to kill Odin.” Thor nodded and Loki looked at the two of them like they were speaking Sumerian. “Being hurt isn’t being weak, and how could he possibly think that making you believe it would be seen that way and Thor believe he wasn’t truly harming you would become anything but a giant, flaming clusterfuck! I could just….”

“Hoover him,” Bucky said.

“Yes, that.”

“I don’t know what a Hoover is in this case,” Steve said. “Is it close to a Mac the Mountain?”

“Oh, Steve, I got a lot subtler since I tossed the bull-wrestler into a wall when we were sixteen,” Darcy said. “J. Edgar got long acting neuro-toxin poisoning. He knew he was dying, but he couldn’t tell anybody. For a man who blackmailed half of Washington, keeping a secret is easy. For a man who thought he was invincible, knowing he was dying and it looked like onset of insanity… that was harder.”

“Oh. Yes, given the situation, that might be appropriate, but we do have that rule about offing heads of state. Even if he did precipitate an invasion of our planet, that’s no reason to sink to his level. I recommend you Lindy him.”

“Lindy, Lindy,” Darcy searched her brain.

“Gang, second swap, you made moves on him until his brain went slosh in his head,” Steve supplied. “Did you know he became a queer rights activist after the war? Came back thinking maybe he’d had the wrong idea what was sin and what was unnatural, joined a homophile ally group. I looked him up once.”

“Really? I killed one of his friends for calling you a twink.”

“He knew it wasn’t the word, it was how it was used. Bucky called me that all the time, but it meant something else between us. And then he got his life saved by a convent of French resistance officers who were nuns for their day jobs. The kind of nuns that don’t have any problems whatsoever giving up male companionship, and felt no lustful urges while he lived in their attic. It’s kind of hard to compare someone willing to kill over insulting the way they love, someone willing to save lives with the way they love, and a whole mess of people trying to kill you while saying that way to love is wrong. One of these things is not like the others. And when the outlier on your chart is a deranged Nazi dictator trying to murder people, it’s easy to tell who’s data is skewed.”

“You talked Science,” Darcy said, still trying to wrap her head around having helped turn a bigot into an ally.

“Simmons is very easy to talk to, and she likes to use science metaphors.”
Darcy nodded. Steve and Jemma had naturally formed a nice supportive bond during the low-key therapy. “Okay. So, your considered advice as a lifelong anti-bully advocate and a national hero is break his brain, present him with hard to contradict evidence of his wrongness, and then let him sort himself out?”

“As plan A, yes. Plan B can’t be diplomacy if plan A was kick the tar out of them. Plan B can be kick the tar out of them if plan A was diplomacy, though. You made that rule.”

“I stole that rule from a website about table top role-play games. But it is a solid rule. Much like the rule about Dugan not being allowed to modify any previously tank mounted weapon for pump-action hand use.”

“I think he’s still sore about that, Angel.”

“Oh, he is, but not as much as the ban on claiming he learned German because he knows how to say ‘Sprechen Sie Bang-Bang?’,” Darcy said. “Okay, killing Odin is a back-up plan. But we are so having words. Strong words.”

The look of confusion on Loki’s face was adorable.

<^>

Steve noticed Bucky getting antsy, not easy to do to a sniper, but he figured it was the mostly unfamiliar tower environment. He nodded and Bucky vanished.

“Jarvis, can you make sure Bucky is okay?”

“Certainly, Captain Rogers. If I may, Prince Loki is showing signs of blood sugar imbalance. I recommend a meal. Shall I place an order?”

“Yes please, I don’t think any of us are up to cooking. What’s on the list of new stuff?”

“The team as a whole has yet to try the Mexican food category. It is similar to the Tex-Mex variant you tried in Arizona for lunch.”

Steve smiled, he’d liked that, and it was very filling. Loki had shown a liking for spicy foods too, so that worked out. “Alright, find a restaurant Tony likes or we’ll never get him out of the lab.”

“Any specific preferences not on file?”

“Not for me or Buck, he never ate anything like the Tex-Mex and I like all of it, but you might ping the others to whet the appetite and get suggestions. Maybe if Tony has a favorite food to look forward to, he won’t sink into his work as much.”

“Of course, Captain Rogers. May I say, I do appreciate your care for Sir’s health?”

“Of course you can, he made you, so he’s like your Dad, obviously you like people being nice to him, you love him. I do it because Tony’s a teammate and a friend. I just want him to get taken care of if it’s too hard to take care of himself.” A penny dropped. “Jarvis, is Tony… like Jane? She has exercises she does to help with it, and if we get Tony on them… it’s okay if you can’t say, I was just thinking.”

“Sir has not been tested for Autistic Spectrum Disorder, but the exercises certainly cannot hurt any. I recommend one of the team leaders suggests it, but non-mandatory, Sir can be….”
“Stubborn about authority?” Steve hedged.

“Quite.”

After filling Loki in, Bucky decided to wander a bit. Everyone living so close together had been reassuring, but also stifling after so long alone. Steve nodded at him as he slipped out, so he knew they would understand.

He explored the finished areas of the tower, took a quick trip to the level still being repaired Darcy mentioned using for training, and discovered the new vent system going in was extra large. That was a bit of a security risk. Climbing inside he began to check it for danger when he heard a sniffle. The part of his brain that grew up on Steve hiding every injury to escape bed rest went on high alert and he ghosted through the vents to the sound.

Doctor Ross, surprisingly enough, was curled up in a corner of the vent, crying.

“Hey, you alright?”

“I’m fine,” she insisted through tears.

“I can see that you are Freaked out, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional, thanks. I wanted to know if I could help.” She laughed a bit at the acronym. Her dad may be sleaze of the highest order, but he was a soldier and he passed on the humor at least. “Come on, you’re important to Bruce and Hulk and they’re important to me. If I can help I want to.”

“For the world’s most dangerous assassin, you’re very sweet,” she said, one brow arching in the light of a vent cover.

“I’m not that dangerous.”

“The General may not have had the intelligence to go into intelligence, but I still know people in the business. You have an amazingly high kill count.”

“For being a sniper since 1942, I wouldn’t say 160 is that high. Pavlichenko got 309 and she was only active during the War. I only did about thirty or so during the Cold War and my time after that as the Asset, which is actually kind of pathetic for a super assassin operating over fifty years. Talia has a bigger count and again, less time.”

“You have nearly double that.”

“Oh, yeah, as far as records go I’m a killing machine,” he agreed peaceably. “Records are written, though, and you know what they say about trusting what you read. When I could, I gave people an out. They agreed to be officially dead, I agreed to not make them actually dead. Some of them work for my gal now. She’s great at organizing stuff. Don’t think we’d have made it through the War without her.”

“But she’s what, twenty-four? Twenty-five?”

“Yup,” Bucky nodded. “It’s complicated, time travel, body switching, you know, weird shit. My bar for normal no longer exists. So, what’s a dame like you doin’ in a vent like this?”

“Freaking out,” she said. “I like vents. They’re small and high up on walls, and hard for people to get into and mostly nobody looks there.”
“That’s why I like them too,” Clint said softly as he rounded a corner. “Tony made these bigger so I could get more gear up here. I have a nest not too far from here. You guys echo.”

Bucky weighed options quickly, saw Doctor Ross’s rapid eye twitches from him to Clint and back and made a decision. “Cool, I’ll have to visit sometime, bring a nest warming present. You mind taking Doctor Ross there now? She’s feeling FINE and I don’t think she should be alone, but Steve is probably wondering where I am.”

“Sure, come on Doc, I have a jumbo pack of fruit roll-ups and one of those picnic bags of chips. And a couple stuffed animals, we’ll have you feeling better soon.”

“I just don’t know why you care. Nobody cared before.”

“Lie,” Bucky said instantly. “Steve said the first thing Darcy asked Bruce was if you were safe. People cared, they just didn’t have the resources to help. It’s different. Darcy wanted to help me, so did Steve, and all our old friends. But they couldn’t pull me out until they could find me, and get me in the same time as Darcy so she could fix the brainwashing and amnesia, and have a decent chance at a world for me to live in. When that happened, they helped me instantly. The team cares about Bruce and Hulk, the two of them care about you, and you’re pretty swell all on your own, besides. Ohana means family.”

“And family means no-one gets left behind,” Clint continued the quote.

“Or forgotten,” Betty finished. “Does the nest have sour-cream and onion flavor?”

“Duh, ex-carnie, not a total savage,” Clint said and ushered Doctor Ross down the vent.

Bucky found a good grate, removed it and dropped into a lab where Fitz shot his metal arm with a Night Night gun.

“We need to work on your aim, but nice reflexes.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
Loki's love and acquisition of candy canes is covered in the Loki and the Harrows outtake.

Being honest can be incredibly hard if you've learned a certain safety in giving accepted lies instead. Having someone willing to validate your honesty is very important.

Sumerian is an ancient language, this is a Darcy-ism for speaking crazy talk.

J. Edgar Hoover was a corrupt FBI head who died oddly, and I have established him as one of Darcy/Bucky's targets. Mac the Mountain and (the there unnamed) Lindy are characters from the early Bodies in Time chapters that Darcy broke.

The homophile movement was a peaceful protest movement for queer, especially gay, rights after WWII. They get historical flack for being too accommodating in protests, but they were fairly revolutionary, many activists in that movement joined not because they or a friend were queer, but because they'd seen what large scale homophobia does in the War and came home determined to be the opposite.
Some convents back in the day had a large number of applicants who wanted in to get out of marriage because they were not into men. Asexual, lesbian, and straight trans men nuns were not uncommon, and as they were aware they were secretly in the cross-hairs, did hide Allied fighters from occupying Nazi forces. They were largely left alone because all they had to do was cite a complete religious ban on male companionship and officers assumed they would not trust an Allied soldier.

Outliers can indicate the hypothesis is wrong, or that the data sample is not large enough so discounting them is unwise, but it's not data-cropping to point to a specific bit of data as flawed based on source. That's called Skewed Data.

All three of the Darcy imposed rules were adapted from Things Mr. Welch Cannot Do in an RPG. It's a funny list of very bad things to make a rpg character do/claim.

Snipers train for patience, but it is possible for them to go into hyper-vigilance and need to check their surroundings to feel safe.

Air vents and ducts are not usually as good for crawling about in as you see in movies. They can get cramped and usually only slim builds can navigate them. Large vent systems mean a larger amount of possible movement.

FINE is a slang acronym I have heard military and law enforcement personnel use. I like it, as it allows me to honestly convey being not-okay to a person I trust if I do not feel safe admitting weakness in the situation.

I averaged for Bucky's kill count. Most of the time I do not include this information, as it is very rude to ask a service member if/how many they have killed. However in canon, Bucky says he remembers them all, so I figure it's a part of his psyche to count and carry that information. Pavlicenho, who we met in Bodies in Time, was a real Soviet WWII sniper with that number of confirmed kills, and is widely considered the best female sniper of all time.

Betty likes vents because they enable her to hide. Clint likes them for similar reasons, but from a different perspective. Betty went into vents to get away from threat, Clint goes into vents to get better angles to be a threat.

Betty is showing anxiety over two people when she's in a not great headspace. Bucky does the right thing yeilding to the less threatening seeming teammate to handle it.

Fruit roll-ups are a common snack food in america that defy my ability to explain. The picnic bags of chips are a large bag of smaller bags in a variety of flavors.

Darcy did indeed start her first conversation with Bruce in Bodies asking about Betty. The team-family is very protective of each other and each others interests, but that is not a family dynamic Betty is used to.

"Ohana means family, and family means no-one gets left behind, or forgotten" is a line from Lilo and Stitch. I feel it sums up the team family very well, both movie and quote.
“Make Odin treat him fairly, Heimdal, or I’ll poke your all-seeing eyes out!”
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Darcy redefines normal again, says goodbye to family and friends, and prepares to rush to Tony's rescue.

Steve redefines family again, learns that sometimes he's out-classed in weird, and helps Darcy not go into shock.

Bucky redefines himself again, muses on the nature of families, and takes them out on a job for the Avengers.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To quadrad, aquadrop25, halfelf87, Maharet, Snowecat, sara47q, ValkyriePhoenix, Darylslover33, Sergeant_Disaster, Shadows_of_Shemai, Joey99, AliceMadisonParker, BloodElf, SionnachOiche3, Notashamed, Selene_Aduial, tigrislilium and the 10 new kudo-ers.

We now enter the canon zone, where everything is sort of like you knew it but not. Please keep your hands, legs, and suspension of disbelief inside the ride at all times. It may get bumpy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As the city regained a new normal that involved Iron Man and Thor doing fly-overs and Captain America visiting children's wards, Darcy learned to enjoy a normal that involved having a digital right-hand man in Jarvis, two boyfriends, a daughter, and two brothers.

"You realize this will be hard to explain to my family, yes?" she asked Loki after he congratulated her on spotting the realest copy out of six only minutes into the longer span of their sparring match. "I left home to get a Masters in Political Science, and the next time I see them, I'm a super hero? With adopted brothers who happen to be Norse gods, a daughter who's older than me, and friends who regularly break physics to see what will happen. My Aunt is going to flip on the adopted brother thing alone, and that's not even touching the poly-amorous triad relationship with my men. My coming out will be overshadowed by all the confusion over the other stuff."

"I assure you, it will be much harder explaining that I am beloved of the Mightiest Champions of Midgard to my... family."

"Your Mom will get it, you made sure I knew Frigga was chill. We're sending the collected evidence on your case with you, she'll know why I couldn't let you stay... like that. And I don’t give a fart what Odin thinks until he actually starts thinking."

"Unfortunately, the Law is Odin’s Word, and so what he thinks has a great impact on my future. Seidkonur Foster is already delaying my return as much as possible, but it will not be long before she
has to admit, I can return. I must face my trial. This much I have learned from you, Shadow Sister, if I am to ever be... good, I must admit my failings. I must own where I have been, the dark roads I have walked, if I am to find better roads to my destination."

“I know, and we’re giving you a pass on what happened under the Mad Hatter’s influence, but the Jotunheim thing still needs to be handled. Again, I say raising you with unknown internalized racism was at fault for that major malfunction, and that was on Odin. Are you sure you don’t want to play hooky some more? My lifetime is a blink to Odin and the other fussbuckets that want to blame you, worst he could do is give you a tardy.”

“I am afraid I must. You, and Thor, and all the other champions and heroes you have introduced me to have been most kind, and my soul-wounds are as healed as they will be in your life. Farther than I dreamed. I shall miss you, my sister.”

“I’ll miss you too, Loki. You’re my brother, and you matter to me. Call me if you can, alright? Or letters, I dealt with a very long distance friendship with Steve by letters and notes.”

“If I can. I will not make promises to you I cannot keep.”

Darcy nodded. Three days later, on top of the rebuilt and renamed Avengers Tower, she stood with her other family beside her as Thor and Loki vanished into the Bifrost replacement Jane had jury-rigged. Nobody judged when she looked at the sky and yelled “Make Odin treat him fairly, Heimdall, or I’ll poke your all-seeing eyes out!”

<^>

Pepper and Tony left after Thanksgiving to spend the winter in Malibu, not that Steve could blame them, New York winters were not for everybody. Clint and Natasha were working overtime so they would have vacation from SHIELD to go to something they called “The Fair” and Phil warned him not to dig into yet. Steve was grateful for the heads-up, he’d accidentally waded into future stuff he couldn’t handle because Darcy had never shown it to him and he now knew why she didn't look there herself. Loki’s students, the infamous Harrow Twins who rated a color code, and their mother Ciara had come by shortly before Loki left and now the Tower was safe from basically every form of attack Loki felt was reasonable to expect. Considering his paranoia levels and the fact he did once invade with an army of aliens, that was a big bill. Darcy, Bucky, and he had babysat a few times when Clint was on a mission, and as long as he was fair, the boys minded him, mostly. Explaining why the rules were there and hearing out counter-arguments drastically dropped the number of broken rules, and he even managed to change a few of his own rules because the Harrow boys pointed out he was running on old information. Jarvis and Darcy still ran HERO operations, now with Phil, Fitz, Simmons, Skye and someone code named Cavalry on a plane provided by Fury to run certain more delicate ops, and Jane still dug into the science behind Asgardian magic, and his family achieved a sort of normal. He and Bucky went to Mass with Matt, Darcy took him to the gym where the owner let them destroy bags after hours, and she and Bucky would go on trips to arboretums and ballet performances and other things they had shared in the spaces between darkness.

Everyone came together in a small North Dakota town in the Badlands for Howard’s funeral, even Peggy and the Howlies. Tony held up until after, when Steve held him as he sobbed and Bruce let a distraught Maria fuss over him. Hulk’s sudden appearance didn’t seem to faze her as much as his sudden shirtlessness. Fortunately, and for reasons he didn’t want to know, she had a spare, Hulk-sized, hand-knit sweater for Steve’s largest teammate. Nobody in the town made a fuss over it, and a short, balding man and a pretty, African American woman who attended from Howard and Maria’s local friends assured him the town had seen stranger. He guessed he believed them, especially when a panicking red-head who vaguely reminded Steve of Skye ran up babbling about warehouses and
artifacts and fudge of all things, and the man, Arthur, ran off in a panic. His companion had only
smiled and shook her head.

Despite personal losses, the team soldiered on, kept in contact, even if it was minimal, and the family
they’d built was safe. Everything was pretty great, until Darcy turned off a Firefly marathon after a
phone call and changed the channel.

Tony had dared a terrorist to come and get him. Thoughtfully providing a home address. Just when
Steve thought Howard’s crazy, self-destructive legacy had been stamped out, Tony pulls something
like this. He was ranting as Darcy talked Pepper through packing a go-bag and had Jarvis start to
pull the records of the woman who had shown up at Tony’s door.

“Wait a second, Pepper, calm down, you can eviscerate Tony later, for now, get to safety. Jarvis,
clear the paparazzi out, I can’t believe Tony didn’t consider their safety. Oh, the barriers went up
already? Then how did…” Darcy went white as a sheet. “TONY! PEPPER! JARVIS!
ANYBODY!”

She stared brokenly at her phone as it went back to her usual screen, a photo she’d taken of Steve
sleeping half on top of Bucky, both of them dead to the world and in Bucky's case, drooling a little.
Normally it made her smile. Now she looked lost.

“I’ll suit up, Angel,” he said softly, touching her arm.

“I have the team’s emergency numbers, should I call them?” Bucky asked.

“Yes, and I should ask Betty to help me prep the quinjet…”

“Miss Lewis, Doctors Banner and Ross are already headed to the flight bay,” Jarvis told them. Steve
wondered how much he felt or remembered from his other location. The strain under the even
British accent made him decide not to ask directly. "Doctor Ross told me to relay that you should all
eat something first.”

“Thank you Jarvis,” Steve said, tossing the high-protein bars from the emergency stash in the
sideboard at his loves. “Are you okay, it sounded like…”

“My Malibu house connection was severed, but I retain connections to most of Sir’s specialty suits.
The one he was wearing suffered a connection failure, but there is no destruction alert as would
happen if the suit or wearer were damaged beyond repair,” the AI said tersely.

“We will bring them back, Jarvis.”

“Yes,” the AI said frostily, a vocal setting Steve hadn’t heard before. “You will.” Suddenly he
understood why Tony hid Jarvis’s sentience. Being a full person meant a full set of emotional
reactions. And someone had just made Jarvis very, very angry. Steve would lay good money that
someone would regret it, and if he didn't already know Jarvis was at his cybernetic heart a good
person, he'd be worried about his own safety if he didn't get Jarvis's family back safely.

<^>

Bucky rallied the Avengers, called in the event to Phil’s team, and changed clothes. His Winter
Soldier uniform was wrong for this, as were his undercover or out on the town looks. Tony had
made it as a bit of a joke, but the soft black pants and navy blue double breasted coat felt right. His
wing flash patch was the same bright, new blood color as Darcy’s and he had all the same weapon
carrying capacity as his Hydra made rig. The new mask was fitted to his face like the silly domino
masks on the kid sidekick ‘Bucky’ character in the comics who always made Steve feel a bit dirty,
because of who the real Bucky was to him. Unlike those masks, his had a variable lens cover that acted as heat vision, night vision, telescopic vision, and complete light protection. The eyeless white was eerie, but he didn’t mind. His nose and mouth could be easily obscured by a thin, proprietary filter fitted like his old muzzle-mask but flexible enough to be rolled into a tube not much larger than a fountain pen. He had blue and one that matched his skin, which was creepy head on but good for escaping notice if he moved quickly. He pulled his long hair out of its neat bun to further blend Sergeant Barnes and the Winter Soldier.

At the flight bay, he nodded to Betty (who had told him a while back to use her first name, and given where she got her last, he didn’t blame her for dropping it where she could) and got in the pilot’s chair. Darcy in her bodysuit, refined shock gloves, and belt of goodies took the second chair, for the gunner. Even Steve agreed he shouldn’t control any part of a plane ever again. But he and Hulk were two of the few who could bail out quickly if necessary. He looked over the flight controls as his family buckled in. Funny to think he had expanded from Darcy and Steve to a whole team as his family.

“Ready to save Iron Man?” he teased.

“Ready to read Tony the riot act,” Darcy said.

“We can pick Hawkeye and Widow up in Virginia,” Steve interrupted her hard voice. “They said they’re just outside D.C. and they have a tracker. We continue to California from there. Wheels up, let’s get our people back.”

“At least our lives are never dull,” Bruce said.

"Mrs Wu was right, it is a curse to live in interesting times," Bucky sighed and lifted the plane into the sky.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Mad Hatter- Loki still hasn’t been able/willing to name Thanos, so they are still using this Darcy-Code for him.
Play hooky- usually used to mean skipping school, in this case refers to avoiding other responsibility.
Fussbuckets- people who fuss excessively, not a nice term, but not a swear word.
Tardy- in academic settings, being late to a class, or the mark saying you were.
Soul-wounds- trauma.
The Fair- see the related But WHY? work for more detail.
Cavalry- Agent Melinda May. In this 'verse she doesn't like the nickname because it was her code name first and she hates worrying about the dual-identity being uncovered.
Go-bag- an emergency bag of the bare essentials if you need to go, NOW.
Read the riot act- to dress down, or berate someone.

Notes:
Normal is a subjective term, and people can adapt to new normals. That being said, sudden changes (remember it's only been a year since Darcy was a totally normal graduate student as far as half her family knew) can be hard for families to accept. As can telling your family that you are not the standard in gender, sexuality, or relationship.
Atonement is a major step in redemption, and although this Loki had really good reasons to lose his shit, he did do significant damage while losing it. Accepting that he needs to at least face the charges is a big step for Loki to take. He's likely to not be his best advocate, as gaining a concept of morality is messing with his ability to judge what he deserves (as is his history of abuse) but he's trying.

Heimdall canonically sees all, Thor would have informed his sister of that.

The Harrow Twins are Loki's students and very adept at using seidr even at a young age. They also rate a color code at SHIELD for when they break out of the day-care. It's Code Chartreuse and there is a work by ValkyriePhoenix of the same name explaining their backstory.

The Bus Team is mostly the same here, except Fury knows that everyone (with the exception of Ward who he adds in time for Mike Peterson and the first canon episode as a way of someone keeping an eye on him) reports to Darcy first, and Fury second.

Skye and Matt wind up passing like ships in the night here because I want to handle that reunion later.

Yes, this is a Warehouse 13 cameo. I had originally placed the safe house in North Dakota because there are huge areas there with practically no population, but I then realized that was also why Warehouse 13 was there, and decided that any town that is neighbor to that kind of crazy will just assume the not-as-dead-as-reported weapons mogul and his wife living there is just more Warehouse shit.

Reminder that canon as not directly meddled with by Darcy and the Darcy adjacent still happens, only now Tony is being reckless and dumb not because of untreated PTSD from New York, but grief over his Dad that he can't express because as far as the world knows, Howard died over twenty years ago and Tony moved on.

"May you live in interesting times" is an ancient Chinese curse, and Mrs Wu was the woman from Little China that sold Bucky udon noodles at Darcy's insistence in Bodies in Time.

Teaser:

“Alright, you did not make old mistakes, that’s good. What new and inventive mistake happened?”
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Darcy sees a familiar face, sings as a form of interrogation, and deals with her family being so much crazier than necessary.

Steve handles Darcy's lack of objectivity, learns that super serums come in new flavors now, and devises a double cross.

Tony wakes up in the woods, berates himself, and then gets it together so Darcy won't laugh at him forever.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To aquadrop25, tigrislilium, Snowecat, Sergeant_Disaster, Joey99, ValkyriePhoenix, quadrad, Beth_Mac, Notashamed, Darylslover33, AliceMadisonParker, ElisaC, sara47q, Shadows_of_Shemai, halfelf87, SionnachOiche3, Faiteach Saoirse (jaxx) and the 4 new kudo-ers.

Be aware, there is no teaser this chapter because my life got really busy suddenly and I had to put other things before writing. For this reason there may also be a gap day Wednesday so I can catch up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy was thankful to get the call from Pepper that had them landing short of the wreckage of the house. Not only because Pepper was a good friend, but because it kept her from seeing something she really didn’t want to. She prepped the landing gear, popped down the ramp and let Steve and Bucky drop the ten feet to the ground to establish a perimeter. Clint bailed out shortly after and when Darcy finally walked out beside Bruce and Talia, she saw someone she had never thought she’d see again.

“Vikitsa? Devochka?” Her heart lurched. Bucky turned slightly on his position to sweep an eye over her, and with the modifications, she knew he was seeing more than she did when he froze for half a second.

“Sestra?” Talia said.

“Stop it,” said Viktoryana, that genius with genetics who was cut for her preference to science over death. Not that her science couldn’t be just as deadly. If they hadn’t wanted her free, she and Bucky might have argued cutting her. “My name is Maya Hansen. I don’t know who you think I am, but I’m not her.”

“Fine, you’re Maya Hansen,” Darcy agreed. Talia felt best in other names too. Only in private or
her own mind did Darcy cross the line to call her by the familiar of her real name. “I’m Darcy Lewis, and this is a rescue. No, it’s not an optional rescue, get in the jet.”

“You’re kidnapping us?”

“Kid, did you never learn that when the good guys do it to save your life, it’s rescuing? Cap, Zima, Hawkeye, we good on the horizons?”

“All clear,” Steve sounded.

“Clear,” copied Clint.

“Heat signature inbound from the south, forty klicks out,” Bucky filled in. “I like these filters.”

“Good for you. Everybody grab a bag or a woman and get them on the jet. I’m feeling itchy.”

On the jet wasn’t much better. She hadn’t anticipated any of her girls knowing her face, but Maya was acting like she didn’t even recognize Talia and Bucky. Actually, she was acting like she didn’t recognize anybody, which given their very public intro as a team, seemed off. Then again Vikitsa had always liked absolute lies, covers that could last for years. She didn’t like the flexibility of acting Talia did.

Through a series of subtle finger taps and shifts, Talia and Bucky discussed the whole thing. Talia hadn’t seen Viktoryana since she was ten, so that was a shifted source. Bucky was reporting UV and infrared alterations consistent with Red Room manipulation, and he thought she seemed familiar. Finally, Darcy couldn’t do it anymore.

“Tili-tili-bom,

Zakroy glaza skoreye,

Kto-to khodit za oknom,

I stuchitsya v dveri,” she sang. Maya flinched at her high eerie rendition of the song.

“Tili-tili-bom.

Krichit nochnaya ptitsa.

On uzhe probralsya v dom.

K tem, komu ne spitsya.”

“Stop that,” Maya hissed.


“Kak uzor na ogne.

Snova proshloe rjadom.

Kto-to pel pesnju mne.

Zinmij vecher kogda-to.”
Slovno v proshlom ozhilo.
Chi’ix- to berezhinix ruk teplo.”

“Would you stop singing in Russian!” Maya demanded.

“You have a horrible accent, you know,” Talia defended the woman they both believed was her sister.

“Fine, fine, I can’t sing in Russian, I can barely speak it,” Darcy admitted. “No vocal muscle memory at all. Hmm,” she thought and switched to a song she knew only her girls had heard, that had not been on the list of approved songs, that was in English.

“Come my loves, I’ll tell you a tale
Of boys and a girl and their love story,
And how she loved them oh so much,
And all the charms she did possess.
This did happen once upon a time,
And as such, was quite complex.
He saw and traveled the land she walked,
Looking out of her eyes, he became obsessed.
Love is like a story book story,
But it’s as real as the feelings you feel.
It’s as real as the feelings you feel.
This love was stronger than the powers so dark,
Evil men could have within their keeping
The spells were weaved, to steal a heart,
But within his mind t’was only sleeping.
Love is like a story book story,
But it’s as real as the feelings you feel.
It’s as real as the feelings you feel.
They said don’t you know we love you oh so much,
And lay dying hearts at the foot of your dress?
She said don’t you know, a storybook love,
Will always have a happy ending?
Then she swooped them up, just like in the books,
And in her mind they could ride away.
Love is like a story book story,
But it’s as real as the feelings you feel.
Love is like a story book story,
But it’s as real as the feelings you feel.
It’s as real as the feelings you feel.”

Somewhere along in there Talia had begun singing it too, her soft voice adding a layer to it, hitting notes that formed chords with Darcy. Bucky was humming it, and Steve was tapping the rhythm on his shield. Pepper looked at them.

“Those aren’t the Knopfler lyrics,” she pointed out. “How did you know them?” she asked Maya, who had been mouthing the words.

“I…”

“It’s alright Maya,” Bucky said. “We could love the girl who loved science more than killing, and we can love the woman she became. We tried to be honest where we could, though that place did its share of damage.”

“I’m supposed to call Aldritch Killian.”

“Wait, what?” Pepper demanded.

“Does this have anything to do with the really confusing project I had to sic the IRS on?” Darcy asked.

“What? THAT WAS MY LIFE’S WORK!”

Steve cut through the shouting in the jet with a sharp whistle. Honestly, sometimes his family lacked anything approaching common sense. With the noise back down to a level he could hear himself think at, he pointed first to Bucky.

“Background, now. You only.”

“Uh, you remember the talk ‘bout my kids? My daughters? One of them was a real crack scientist, mostly biology. Could make a poison out of anything. But that’s not what the Red Room wanted, so at ten, we got her smuggled across the border and called her in as dead. Her name was Viktoryana, but you know how my girls treat names.”

“And the song?”

“Uh, that was me,” Darcy confessed. “Bucky and I wanted to share who we were, the three of us. But we couldn’t exactly talk about it. So…”

“So you took Princess Bride’s credits song and adapted it to tell a different love story. Okay,” he pointed at Ms. Hansen. “You, who is Aldritch Killian and how is this connected to anything Darcy
would have worried about enough to try to shut down?’”

“He’s my boss at Advanced Idea Mechanics, AIM. I’m working on a cellular regeneration serum, something to kick-start the body’s own map of what goes where so we can regrow cells that ordinarily couldn’t be.”

“Like an entire left arm?” he asked pointedly.

“No, not at first, I really never meant it to go that far in my lifetime. I was thinking more like the nerves in an arm. Killian wants full limb regrowth, but I keep telling him, unless he can get me Connors and Tony as consultants, that’s never going to be stable. I think I got the neural regrowth handled, Tony helped me ages ago in Bern. But when we try for limbs, there’s a… glitch.”

“Oh sweet Swear Jar,” Steve sighed. He had loved Erskine like a kindly grandpa, but if he’d known then what that idea would do in the wrong hands, he’d have never agreed to take the serum. “Let me guess, it involves massive external physical change, possibly including complexions that are seen more often in a box of Crayola crayons than in people?”

“Oh, no,” Hansen corrected him swiftly. “I didn’t even try biochemical lensing, that’s insane, you have to tailor each dose to the biology of the recipients, and take dark reactions into account and that’s like expecting the unexpected. Abraham Erskine was a one off in picking good candidates.”

“Doctor Hansen is right,” Bruce said. “Bio-lensing like was in our serums wouldn’t work for what she wanted. Bucky and Natasha both got a weaker bio-lensing, but he survived on luck and she had hers custom made using her own cells and isn’t nearly as strong, fast or durable as you and Hulk. We can’t ethically test it, but I’m sure she couldn’t regrow nervous system cells. Bucky can’t, we checked the bonding to see if we could adapt the base for a more trustworthy arm.”

Doctor Hansen nodded and Steve mentally slapped himself for assuming she didn’t have a doctorate. “Alright, you did not make old mistakes, that’s good. What new and inventive mistake happened?”

“Um… in high doses, lack of emotional regulation and subsequent or unrelated hormone shifts in the endocrine system can cause subjects to… explode?” she said, looking for all the world like a kid caught with a hand in the cookie jar.

“THE HELL?” Darcy burst out.

“Angel, be quiet, I’m thinking.” Darcy stopped talking mid shout. “You aren’t objective enough here. I’m driving, agreed?”

“Agreed,” Darcy nodded.

“When were you supposed to contact Killian?”

“As soon as I got Tony out of the house and in a good ambush spot. He’s a moron with guns though, so I only got out with the fortunate help of Ms. Potts.”

“I thought the Mandarin did that?” Pepper said, rolling with her place as a back-up hostage easily.

“Killian is also a gigantic showboat of the first order. And he hired me for my brain and treats me like an idiot, so I know things he doesn’t think I do. He needed a way to hide the explosions. They’re hot enough to leave radiation shadows with no radiation, so they aren’t ‘gas main accident’ viable. When a crazy terrorist with Killian’s flair starts taking credit for wildly destructive bombings, I know what’s actually happening. Never hire someone smart and treat them like someone lesser
than they know they are. It's just asking for a knife in the back. Doesn't mean I can use a legal one, though.”

“You have no proof,” Steve said. “Because it would be incinerated.”

“Exactly. If he let me stay in small corrections, this wouldn’t happen. I couldn’t even get a ficus to regrow more than three leaves before it goes boom. We were nowhere near ready for human testing. But it’s my work that’s killing people, so I can’t turn him in. It’s… annoying, being trapped by someone who’s not half as smart as I am because I love my work too much. Maybe they had a point,” she finished in a whisper and Natasha moved to hold her, which the scientist did nothing to stop.

“No, they didn’t, killing a kid is never a point, not a good one anyway,” Steve told her. “Call Killian, tell him you couldn’t get Tony out of the mansion in time, but you have someone else. Nat, Darcy, Clint, you all can do undercover, who wants to be the hapless assistant?”

“Pardon me very much, Captain Rogers,” Pepper said, insulted. “I can be kidnapped just as well as they can and I have an ace up my slightly singed designer sleeve. Killian thinks I’m attractive,” she added with a face of disgust. Doctor Hansen shot her a sympathetic look.

“Well, you are attractive, and it gives you an edge on him if you can get him talking?” Maya said like she was desperately trying to reach for a silver lining she had reason to believe was old tinfoil.

“Alright, tell him you have Pepper. Jarvis, I need a good place for a counter ambush, please.”

And like that, the team was thinking in harmony again.

Somewhere in Tennessee, Tony Stark was waking up to a world of pain and cold.

“Note to self, next time build in connection to the unlimited power source in your chest first, idiot,” he muttered. Well, he had to get to shelter, and a phone, and probably food. He wondered when he last ate. He opened his mouth to ask Jarvis and remembered the suit’s connection hadn’t been fully integrated yet and besides that, he had no power for it. And a suit of power armor is basically just a really neat looking conversation piece minus the power part.

“Well crap. Sorry not sorry, Cap.” He looked up. Steve had taught him star navigation out in Nevada. It was almost as cold there at night as it was in these snow-touched woods. He wasn’t entirely sure where he was, but he could take a straight line until he hit something and not circle. “Come on Tony, you survived Afghanistan, Iron Monger, Palladium in your blood, Whiplash’s drone army, the Chitauri, and the fucking Winter Soldier himself broke into your house and is now a friend. You will not die of freaking snow. You get this shit together or Lewis will mock you forever.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Devochka- baby girl (Russian).
Sestra- sister (Russian).
Zima- Winter (Russian) Bucky's current call-sign.
Klicks- Americanized slang for kilometers.

Notes:
Russian names can take a ton of forms, and Vikitsa is a younger, more familiar version of Viktoyana. Just like Natka is the little-girl name of Natalia, and Talia is her older familiar name. Vikitsa never got a grown counterpart name because she hasn't seen Darcy and Bucky in ages and right now is not in a place for Darcy to feel okay finding one for her.

In my canon the Red Room events all happened much earlier, and Nat was born earlier than Zola claims in Winter Soldier. She and Maya look younger than they are because all the girls got very low doses of the serum as they aged. Nat has it stronger than Maya because she stayed in the program longer.

The first Russian song is Tili Tili Bom, a lullaby about the monster who breaks into the houses of children who won't sleep and kills them. The second is the Russian version of "Once Upon a December" from the animated Anastasia movie. You can find both on YouTube.

Storybook Love by Mark Knopfler is the end credit song of the movie Princess Bride. Darcy sings a close alteration. It really fit the Bucky captivity situation really well already.

In Bodies in Time, Darcy put AIM under audit by the IRS because she distrusted one of the projects. In IM3, Aldritch is looking for investors, despite having already had enough capital to have been running human trials of Extremis for a long time. Maybe he needed a cleaner investor after that audit, hmm?

I really hated how watered down Maya was in the movie, her role was originally much larger, so I'm venting some of that into her career frustrations here. Nerve regrowth would be a fantastic development and honestly would be worth it without regrowing limbs.

Steve has picked up Tony's habit of substituting words when he wants to cuss, since he is looking to Tony as a model on some levels. So he refers to the Swear Jar instead of swearing.

Biochemical lensing is actually a thing, certain substances can make certain naturally occurring reactions bigger. Erskine's description of magnifying everything inside sounds like a way complex and basically impossible bio-lensing process. Dark reactions are ones a doctor can't witness except in the outcomes. Any medicine that might cause a dark reaction is dangerous. That can be reduced by using stem-cells (adult not fetal) of the recipient to tailor the treatment, but that's tricky.

In the movie the word 'regulate' gets used a lot in discussions of people exploding. Since all of the experimental Extremis recipients are vets with horrible damage I assume they also have PTSD, which would add to 'regulating' being important if the trigger is hormonal and influenced by emotional regulation.

The ficus in question is the one in her hotel room in Bern as seen exploding in Bern after Happy plucked a leaf and it regrew.

Tony's suit dying on him was attributed to the experimental armor not having a connection to the arc reactor yet, which seems sort of off for Tony. I blame tired or
drunk science, which are hardly ever that good once rested and sober.

I don't have a teaser for you, but instead, if anyone would like to prompt me for a holiday short in the side story dump at the start of the series, I'm all ears. Writing the long stuff is harder than a quick short to get written around my holiday schedule.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Darcy hears a message, plays matchmaker, and makes plans.

Steve keeps her level, watches how the computer elite of the world react to Jarvis and vice versa, and watches.

Harley Keener adapts to a new level of weird.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To quadrad, Sergeant_Disaster, Beth_Mac, Darylslover33, tigrisliiium, ValkyriePhoenix, Joey99, halfelf87, Arwin01, sara47q, AliceMadisonParker, Shadows_of_Shemai, SionnachOiche3, Selene_Aduial and the seven new kudo-ers.

And, AHA YES! I got the chapter to work for me, ahahaha. But in all seriousness I had to mess with who I was using as POV, and I found I like it, so be ready for the fact that I will not be sticking strictly to the Darcy>Steve>Bucky progression and may even wind up doing sections with no clear POV narrator. I do like the tripartite system, it's easier to build a good sized chapter of decent quality with it, so that will remain.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Darcy?” Pepper called, waking her.

“Ugh, yeah? And for the record, I hate napping on planes. Napping on planes always leaves me feeling like something crawled in my brain and died. Like morning breath in my skull.” Darcy pushed herself upright from Steve’s lap. He was, sickeningly, fast asleep on Bucky’s shoulder and incredibly peaceful looking. Damn him. Damn them both, she knew once Bucky was fully down only screaming would wake him. Yet another legacy of the Squids, they both could sleep anywhere and Bucky had two sleep settings, feather light and dead to the world. Meanwhile, Darcy had insomnia and couldn’t get decent sleep in the air.

“I know the feeling,” Pepper commiserated, interrupting Darcy’s mental litany about the unfairness of life and sleep. “I had to go to Tokyo once and Tony… okay, not the time. Jarvis just patched through a message that got dumped into the secure communications buffer in the suit. Tony, lovable moronic genius he is, can’t remember my cell number without a back-up memory, and can remember the voice mail dead-drop system codes for the secure server buffer.”

Darcy was awake in an instant.

“Play the message.”

“Pepper, it's me. I've got a lot of apologies to make and not a lot of time, so... first off. I'm so sorry I put you in harm's way. That was selfish and stupid and it won't happen again. Also, it's Christmas
time. The rabbit's too big. Done. Sorry. And I'm sorry in advance because... I can't come home yet.” There was a pause Darcy filled by slapping her forehead. “I need to find this guy. You gotta stay safe. That's all I know. I just stole a poncho from a wooden Indian.”

“So... do we wake Steve up?” Pepper asked. “I was going to try, but he’s out solid and I know he has problems with it sometimes.”

“No, this isn’t a Steve problem yet. We need to find Tony and that’s a me and my people job. They don’t know him and he doesn’t know the counter signs. Would it have killed Tony to tell us his location? He told a terrorist his location. That man really is an absolute wreck of a human being,” Darcy sighed.

“Oh, this is nothing, you should have seen him in Bern at the Y2K New Years party,” Maya told her.

“No, I don’t ask Nat about Clint, and I don’t want to hear from you about Tony’s hedonist years. I can accept my babies grew up into babes, but that doesn’t mean I want to know about it,” Darcy warned. Some things a mother should not know too much about.

“I didn’t mean that, it happened yes, I was in a rough phase and hadn’t admitted I had Underwood tendencies yet, but that part wasn’t very memorable,” Maya said waving off the concern. “I meant the man wrote the equation that solved the cellular level regeneration, while blind drunk, on the back of his ‘hello my name is’ name card that read ‘You know who I am’. He’s brilliant, but a total train-wreck.”

“That he is,” Darcy sighed, then processed Maya’s earlier remark. “You like women?”

“Yes,” Maya said bluntly, chin out, daring Darcy to make a big deal. Darcy smothered a chuckle.

“Are you seeing anyone? Nat tells me there’s this very nice Agent named Lillian, she has some piercings, but an argument could be made that’s a good thing.”

“Are you seriously trying to set me up with a date right now?”

“She spends too much time with Bucky and Natasha,” Bruce rumbled from his sleeping corner. “All three of them, worse than all the grandmothers in India about setting people up.”

“We have romantic souls,” Darcy defended.

“You had him hold you out a van as it skidded to a stop just to get my girlfriend’s trust so she’d move in with us. That’s not a romantic soul, that’s a crazy brain.”

“I kinda miss the dangle game,” Maya said wistfully.

“We can play later, sweetie,” Darcy assured. “Back on topic, do we know where the fuck Tony was when he sent that?”

“Somewhere that still has racially insensitive wooden sculptures in ponchos?” Pepper offered.

“You’d be surprised at how little that narrows it down. Racism is so very not over in modern America.” Sighing she stuck her head up towards the front where Nat was piloting with Clint. “We need to get back to one of Jarvis’s main centers, detour to the closest one.”

“Research facility in Yuma or country house in the mountains outside Flagstaff?” Clint asked, glancing at the navigation screen.
“Flagstaff, we need privacy.”

In Tony’s mountain cabin, which was more like a mansion with log cladding, Steve helped work the tension out of Darcy’s shoulders as she convened with several people online using words he didn’t really know. Jarvis was a full participant, but he appeared on the screen as any other member of the conversation, as a moving avatar, not as a real human on camera. He chose a color shifting wave form of his voice. Steve noticed the color changes correlated to Jarvis’s mood when he spoke, and continued shifting when others talked. It was like tracking a body posture or face. He started lining up colors with emotions, red was anger, blue was sadness, a traffic cone yellow orange was fear. Sometimes they blended, calmer green had not shown up in pure form yet, but aquas seemed nostalgic or wistful almost. There were only a few flashes, mostly when he was pulling out or relaying data from Tony’s past.

The problem, from what he could tell of the discussion, was that Jarvis did not hold all his information in any one place. He had too much to do that. There were servers that held his personal files, his memory, but they only updated with pertinent information every six hours. With the Malibu part of him disconnected, it wouldn’t update his memory core with anything but the most basic information. The team was complaining so Steve added his own two cents.

“If the problem is disconnection, why don’t you just… reconnect it?”

“Lieu, who the hell is on your line?” demanded a rapidly morphing geometric shape with a male voice.

“The guy who can keep a clear head,” Darcy bit out. “And he’s right, we’ve been looking at this like white hats, like it’s salvage. What if we went black hat on it? Hack into the system and get the data back that way?”

“Is that even possible?” a feminine sounding blue and silver lava lamp asked. “The footage was pretty clear on the damage.”

“That was mostly superficial,” Jarvis said in a rippling teal. “The living quarters took the brunt of the damage, the terminal itself was in a basement and the server was below even that, under anti-tank ballistic concrete.”

“That’s… kinda scary details, J-man,” said an icon of shooting stars with an accent Steve couldn’t identify, he also wasn’t sure of gender. “Exactly what side are you on?”

“Lay off, Bog,” Darcy told the outraged foreign voice.

“But that kind of intel is a direct threat! We like Iron Man, he open sources all kinds of good shit and he hires half the people who probe his system if they get anywhere. I want to keep him safe.”

Agreement came from the speakers in a multilayered wave and Jarvis’s colored line of emotion went bright kelly green for a second.

“J, may I tell them?”

“Level two only,” Jarvis said after three seconds of serious thought in purple.

“Jarvis knows the layout because he has Tony’s permission to know the layout. He’s been there before, he’s seen it. If Tony trusts him with that after all the crap that’s tried to kill him, then so do I and so should you. This discussion is over, now, Jarvis, can you get at the server?”
From there it went back to words Steve didn’t get, but he was happy. They would find Tony.

<^>

Harley Keener had seen a lot of strange things for being a kid. Iron Man sitting on his sofa was probably one of the weirder ones. Iron Man’s mechanic working was definitely one of the weirder ones. Weirder than when the car muttered to him about a faulty transmission weeks before his mom had to take it to the shop. Weirder than when his sister made the dead plants in their mom’s garden after a frost come back. At least Harley knew what a mutant was, he had access to Google. Actually, he had access to all the search engines, even the ones at the big universities and the White House, but he tried not to use those. He had to figure their dad was one, ‘cause it really wasn’t their mom. That’s probably why dad left, the way mom talked about mutants sometimes. When he got into a big university and made lots of money building stuff, he was going to take his sister and live in a different house and tell everybody he was a mutant so his mom could see what she’d done.

Iron Man’s mechanic was strange, but Harley reckoned he would be, being half of a hero and part machine and also totally in denial about how Iron Man worked. He made Iron Man, but seemed to think he was Iron Man. That’s not how it worked. Iron Man was part metal and part man, it was in the name. The guy in the suit was only part of that. Not that Harley could explain that to the mechanic, especially after a finger had decided it liked him and tried to follow him. That happened once with the blender and his mom threw it out. He’d saved it, like he saved all the machines in town people threw out. Sometimes he could help them, and sometimes they just wanted him to take the parts he could to save other things. Like the metal part of Iron Man wanted him to have the canister the mechanic gave him. That could be useful. He didn’t want the fire alarm going off again to save him.

It was fun, though, watching how somebody who wasn’t able to hear the machines fixed stuff. Harley wanted to learn to do that. Seeing the problems in your head because of how the machines acted, not how they told you they felt. It was way cooler than what he did with his powers. Not that he was ever telling the mechanic that, his machine in his chest had very firm Opinions about letting the fleshy bits get too excited. Harley had never met an electromagnet that thought so loud and clear before. He almost didn’t recognize it.

When he showed the mechanic the spot with the shadows, and the mechanic asked if he believed if there wasn’t one for the guy who blew up because he hadn’t gone to heaven, Harley bit his lip. He’d been close enough to see a little of it, before the world whitened out and he woke up with a bloody nose. He was messing with how close he had to be to get cameras to show him stuff, and he knew the guy who blew everyone up was a mutant. Nobody else turned orange and glowing before exploding everything. He finally settled for just repeating that it was what people said. He knew people who said mutants didn’t have souls, and they’d think that. Harley thought people who saw too much bad sometimes got funny, like the guys who wore the Vietnam hats and all tried to bury themselves when Fourth of July fireworks happened. Maybe a mutant who saw too much bad would lose control, but that didn’t make having an accident wrong really. Killing people was wrong, but he died too, so he probably didn’t mean it. Harley worried what would happen if he had an accident. Machines could hurt people, but at least his sister only made plants healthy.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Counter signs- phrases used to confirm identity in spy circles.
Babes- attractive women.
Cladding- a type of wall covering that fools the eye into seeing a wall made of wood or stone.
Two cents- opinion.
White/Black hats- hackers who do so morally and above board are 'white hats', illegal and immoral hacking is 'black hat'.

Notes:
There are various ways soldiers wind up sleeping when they come home, Darcy experiences insomnia, a difficulty sleeping, Steve and Bucky can cat-nap anywhere, and Bucky switches between vigilant sleep and strong sleep inertia. The issue with planes is more obviously just because Darcy was in a plane to go meet Jane when her guys died (ish, they got better).

Sometimes people with very high IQs have recall problems, and can remember massively complex things, but forget our own phone numbers. Tony already showed this tendency with his statement his SSN was 5. Pepper isn't actually upset about this habit, but rather finds it equally annoying and charming.

The message is lifted straight from the movie. I always wondered why he didn't tell Pepper where he was or even try to give her more clues. Darcy is speaking as me in that.

Maya did have canon sexy-times with Tony in 2000, but her presentation showed her much easier with Pepper and I like adding in queer ladies when I can. Dottie Underwood was the cover name of an early iteration of a Black Widow as seen in Agent Carter and she acts very into Peggy. Enough so that I headcanon the RR as not allowing talk of LGBT issues but also having a side slang referencing the Underwood cover getting honey-trapped (suckered into helping the enemy because the enemy was hot) as a was of saying Lesbian.

Lillian of the piercings is referenced in Winter Soldier, I'm making her bi here because I can.

Wooden Indian statues (that is what they are called even by people who don't like the term Indian for First Nations people) are racial stereotype statues often used to advertise tobacco or cigars that are really squicky from a race standpoint. They are also more common than people think.

Jarvis using a wave form image of his voice and color coding his emotions is about as close as he can get to a face. I picked colors for emotions that match what Ultron was feeling when the body of Vision was created, the magenta picking up red for anger, the turquoise picking up a desire for a better world as he saw from the past (in a messed up way), and yellow for fear, because seriously, nobody tries to kill a whole planet unless they are afraid of it somehow.

Hackers love open source coding, stuff they can play with and modify and not get in trouble for using for free, and some companies will hire hackers who get into the systems on the 'better with us than against us' idea. Tony does these things because he likes smart people and wants to give them fun toys. As a result, the hacker community is very Pro-Tony and defensive of him.

I made the existence of mutants canon for Bodies, but never really wanted to pull in a canon mutant character as a POV so far. So I made Harley Keener a closeted
technopath. His sister we only hear about is a phytokenetic, a plant manipulator. He's also just plain smart, and has a grasp on big emotional concepts like his Dad leaving possibly having to do more with grown up stuff than him, accidents not making a person innately bad, and PTSD even if he has no name for it.

Teaser:

Heaven have mercy, because she was all out at the moment.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Bucky helps his lost daughter and Pepper prepare for a big con, while dealing with worry.

Pepper goes into the con, discovers it's not that hard, and gets serum'd, while dealing with Aldrich Killian.

People listening on the com may not know what just happened, but are sure Pepper cackling will not end well for Killian.

Chapter Notes


I didn't spot any translations, but if you need them, let me know and I'll add them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky wasn’t sure he liked this plan. He’d probably be okay with it if it were Talia or Darcy going with Maya, he’d seen their undercover skills before. Pepper was a civilian. Yes, living with Tony prepared her for a vast amount of crazy, but she was an unknown in the field. Darcy was laughing silently at him, the bubble of giggles ringing in his head through the link.

You’re being ridiculous, Pepper can do this. She’s just playing a slightly less informed version of herself.

I know that, Doll. Doesn’t mean I don’t worry. I like Pepper, she’s nice. What if something goes wrong?

That’s why I asked Phil to get back in touch with the inside guy he found. If necessary, I’ve been assured MacBain can handle it. He got away from Ciara once.

Oh. That’s different then. You gotta keep me updated on where all the hidden aces are, Darcy, or I’ll worry when it’s dumb.

That’s fair. Check on Maya for me, will you?

Sure.

Maya was calmly arranging her hair in one of the bathrooms of the hotel rooms they had picked. The rooms were adjoining and Maya had gotten one room normally while Darcy and Jarvis had
changed the records to make the second one unavailable due to malfunction of the shower. Maya would be pulling the con from the rented room and the team would stage out of the adjoining one in case things got bad.

“You look calm,” he said neutrally.

“It’s not like I didn’t spend most of a decade learning to betray people. And then pretending I was someone I wasn’t the rest of my life. I’m almost forty.”

“You’re thirty seven, that’s not almost forty, and I’m saying no matter how calm you are, you shouldn’t look it. Not unless you told Killian about your background.”

“I would never!” Maya stood up and started quietly shouting at him about professionalism and keeping a cover and knowing he was a risky gamble at the start even if she didn’t know she would lose. Her voice never raised higher than normal speaking, but she was obviously angry and indignant as she railed. The training had been good, for all she had left early. She wound down and her breath came just a touch too hard.

“Better, you look a little redder now, see?” he said pointing her at the mirror. “It’s not enough to say the lines, you have to look it to sell them to a man who doesn’t know you. A dozen tiny hints. Here, have some whiskey.” He passed her a small bottle like nicer plane lines served.

“You know this is going to do practically nothing, right?”

“To your metabolism, yeah, it’s nasty tasting water,” he grinned. “But it’s nasty tasting water that smells like inebriation. And an inebriated woman is rarely seen as a threat. I put half a bottle in the room so you can make it look like you drank more than you did. But you need to smell like you drank any at all first.”

“Will you stop the nice teacher act,” Maya demanded. “I don’t like dealing with memories of her as you but now you’re you and she’s not and you act like she is. I don’t like that that sentence is a thing I just said. Stay in your boxes.”

“We never had boxes to start with. She kept my memories of me, and when she visited, sometimes that wasn’t her, it was me. The real me, not the me they made. Forget the me they made, he’s gone and not coming back. I cared about you too, and I’m here now, telling you, drink your whiskey young lady or you don’t get to play.”

“You are a really bizarre dad-figure,” Maya said, before uncapping the bottle and swishing with it.

“Eh, I did my best and only one of you that I know of got really bad daddy issues. I’ve known worse fathers.”

“Who had the daddy issues?” Maya asked with a brow up. Her breath smelled like booze.

“Lena. She uh, you know how nowadays ‘daddy’ can mean something that’s totally not what a parent should be?”

Maya burst out laughing. “Oh god, that’s insane. You were already taken. Your wife *lived in your head*. How did she think that would go anywhere?”

“We aren’t married,” Bucky said to avoid discussing Yelena.

“Bullshit. Did you or did you not stand by them in sickness and health, richer and poorer, for better or worse? And death *tried* to part you. Death failed. You’re only missing rings. Good thing you
spent time in Russia, you still have the wedding band finger on the right hand, where Eastern Orthodox puts it.”

“Yeah, okay, I’m married. And you, little missy, are going to be late to your own recital. One more coat of texturizer and then you go to work.”

“Gah! Fine, out, overbearing one.”

“My daughter, all grown up and fucking over asswipes,” he said with a sniffle. “Seems like just yesterday I was showing you how to pick pockets and poison drinks.”

“Dad, out. Now.”

Bucky laughed as he left. Pepper passed him to take her place in the room, and he had to admit she looked right.

“Oh, whiskey. Thank you, Bucky.” He was about to stop her when she took a small sip, swished and blew a mist into the air like perfume from an atomizer that she stepped through. She caught him staring. “What? I had to stay sober at Tony’s parties without seeming sober because it was, and I’m quoting His Imperial Immaturity himself, ‘a buzzkill’ if I wasn’t drinking. I also order martinis that are mostly olives so I can nurse it between olives and look like I’m drinking more than I am.”

“Oh. Smart move on the misting. Compare notes with Maya about Killian’s knowledge of your alcohol tolerances and figure out how much needs to be missing from the bottle if you are both a tiny bit buzzed.”

“Will do. Is my hair disheveled enough?” she asked, touching the ruffled locks. “Normally I’m happy to be one of those people who don’t really get bed head, but I think I need to do more here. Stress tends to show in how you care for your appearance, I can tell how bad a bender Tony is on and for how long he’s been on it based on tee shirt stains. But I have hair that doesn’t muss.”

“Yes you do, and yeah, you need something, but don’t let Maya trick you into using her texturizer. Her hair can handle that trick for looking greasy and limp, yours will just look styled.” He pondered the question of making overly nice hair act strained. Pepper always looked good, she even filed her nails when most people would have chewed them. “Actually, you may want to get it wet, so she can use you cleaning up as a cover for the phone call giving him the room number.”

Pepper liked talking to Maya as she waited for their kidnapping. She had a sharp, biting wit and a self-deprecating air about her work that was both sad, and refreshing after Tony. She had a feeling not all of that was an act. She was about to offer to cuddle the other woman when Killian murdered the room service guy and took them away. Her shock at the sudden brutality helped her hide her knowledge of his impending arrival and Maya’s connection. Surprise isn’t hard to fake if you are surprised by something, just not the thing you should be. More than one tedious surprise party thrown in her honor by her parents had been survived that way, as had more than one horrible gift. She loved her family, but there was a reason she didn’t visit much unless she was punishing Tony by spurning his money. While many people would have thought that Tony assigning her to buy her own birthday presents was annoying, Pepper kind of loved him for it. She never had to worry he’d mess it up or get the wrong size or somehow decide a rabbit taller than the door of the house with arms that looked like boobs from certain angles was appropriate. Tony buying her presents never worked well. Giving her the money to get her own was so much less stressful, and if he forgot, she still got a present and could get something extra nice to compensate for the lapse of memory.
She also used already existing anger at Aldritch Killian. It wasn’t hard to be an outraged kidnapping victim if you were already outraged. She just never corrected him that she was outraged about human trials of Exremis and the whole Mandarin idea and Tony falling away from her… She closed her eyes and shook a bit at that memory, fighting tears. Tony survived, and she was not giving Killian the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

Typical self-absorbed asshole he was, he assumed she was scared of him. She didn’t correct him about where her fear was. While she helped Loki learn moral codes, she’d picked up the trick that not correcting an inaccurate assumption wasn’t technically a lie. Most people apparently lied to themselves better than any outsider could. She figured that was part of why she could watch gory movies, but not ones with the violence off screen or vague. Her own mind made a worse picture than a movie could.

Oh, fantastic, he was monologuing. She should have known he’d monologue. Suddenly irritation overwhelmed everything else. Well, she figured, it would have even if I knew nothing else about him, so I’m not breaking character.

“Look, Aldritch, it’s been a long day, my bodyguard is in the hospital following a terrorist attack, my boyfriend gave out our home address on national television, I almost got blown up, and the first good drinking partner I’ve had in a while handed me to you. Let’s cut this short, this is about Tony, you think he’ll help you... he won’t.”

“It's more, uh, embarrassing than that. I brought you here because you were once his girlfriend and now you're my, uh...”

“Trophy. Please don’t even pretend I’m more than that to you.”

“Yeah,” he said with a smarmy try at humility. “That. Finally the man who had everything handed to him will have something taken away.”

Something in Pepper’s mind snapped. How dare he. He didn’t know a single damn thing about Tony. He obviously wasn’t paying attention or he would have seen how Tony was thrusting everything he could at the world, desperate to give enough, to do enough, to finally sleep at night feeling like he was enough. Tony might put up a glib façade, but it was really not that hard to look at everything since Iron Man began to see Tony never had things easy.

“Actually, he hates having things handed to him.”

Aldritch ignored her as he prepared the injection. Pepper briefly considered calling for Maya, but the other woman had her own cover. Some shit you dealt with yourself. She braced as the needle bit and focused on why she was doing this. Who she was doing this for. Tony, her reckless, crazy, selfless man. Darcy, her friend and co-conspirator. Happy, who just wanted to feel like he had a place, laying in a hospital bed. Maya, so broken and so strong, the child of other strong broken people. Maria, who did not deserve to see her son’s obituary.

And herself. The man playing God with her body now had constantly harassed her. He’d tried to seduce her and to corrupt the morals of Stark Industries she set. He had hurt people she cared about and in doing so hurt her. It wasn’t noble, it wasn’t justice, and there would be no court of law if she acted on her feelings because there wouldn’t be a body.

He left her and Pepper began to laugh as sweat dripped off her body. He had no idea what he’d just unlocked in her. Heaven have mercy, because she was all out at the moment.
On the other end of the bug pinned inside Pepper’s ultra-durable sports bra made from an experimental anti-ballistic, fire proof, blade resistant, and mostly frictionless cloth, a group of people heard the laughter.

“Anybody feel a little bit bad for the unlucky sap?” A long silence and a few incredulous looks. “Didn’t think so.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
Quick reminder, the MacBain clan and Agent Ciara Harrow are from ValkyriePhoenix and the wonderful work Code Chartreuse.

The 'daddy' reference is to a particular kink subculture that is not my or Bucky's kink, but best explains Yelena developing a sexual desire for the man who raised her.

Eastern Orthodox weddings place the marriage band on the right hand, not the left.

In Iron Man, Pepper asks for a Martini, extra olives, at least three olives. Filling a martini glass with olives lowers the amount of actual martini, and eating the olives would make the glass empty faster than sipping at the drink slowly to avoid getting drunk. Also, a variable number of olives make it hard to tell if that’s the same glass.

Some hair, especially fine hair like Gwenneth Paltrow has, doesn't do the bed head thing without extreme provocations. I headcanon Pepper as having the kind of hair we'd all like to hate her for that looks hollywood styled in those casual and post battle shots because other wise her action scenes make no sense. Nat at least has obvious styling product in her hair during most of her action shots.

All of what Pepper listed canonically happen to her in 24 hours. I'm surprised she didn't kill him sooner.

The explosions seem to happen with hormone shifts predictable by emotional upset, so I personally think that being pissed as hell when she got the injection is why the Extremis worked on Pepper so well.

That sports-bra had superpowers, that's canon. Anything else would have died with what she put it through.

Teaser:

“You need to talk to my brother. HARLEY!”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Steve hears new intel and leads a team to Rose Hill, Tennessee.

Zoe Keener watches the new people, has a conversation with Clint, and decides he brother needs to be in on it.

Darcy impresses Harley, cuts a deal, and realizes she no longer perceives weird. Not necessarily in that order.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To SionnachOiche3, quadrad, halfelf87, HellKat, Shadows_of_Shemai, Joey99, Tsita, ValkyriePhoenix, Sergeant_Disaster, Notashamed, Darylslover33, sara47q, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, Jade01, Beth_Mac and the 5 new kudo-ers.

Thank you for your patience with my update schedule getting screwy. So you're aware, next week is like, wall to wall holiday stuff with my fam, so no promises next week.

Additionnally, while I normally use italics for mind communication over the link in this story, this chapter has a conversation in sign language that is in italics. If it's not the main trio talking and it's italics, assume it's sign.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Steve?” Darcy woke him with a small shake. His eyes tried to focus on her and failed for half a minute while he blinked. He hadn’t felt this exhausted since the War. Must be the constant worrying, he never had been good leading from the back.

“It my watch already?” he asked her blearily. It felt like he’d just laid down a moment ago, although the cottony feel of his mouth said longer.

“No, Bucky’s still got Pepper’s com, and after him it passes to Bruce. But the town of Rose Hill, Tennessee, exploded last night. Not the whole town, but we have reports of glowing fire monsters and a guy who kills them with seemingly no tools or way of touching them. Who do we know who can weaponize anything and has a slightly insane lack of natural fears about fire?”

“You found Tony.”

“No,” she told him, looking abashed. “I found where Tony was, maybe. If it was him, he will have moved on, Killian wouldn’t have moved on him unless he was in a position to do something, not if it would bring Tony’s continued status among the living to light. He needs a ruthlessly effective Mandarin to get shit done. And it could be another of Coulson’s 084’s and not have anything to do with Tony. But we start away from the null hypothesis and it’s the simplest explanation, though. Additionally, we got into the data from Malibu, mostly, and Jarvis thinks he may have plotted a
course there in the time that was damaged in the explosion.”

“Really? Jarvis what’s the status on recovering that, do you know why you would have sent Tony to Tennessee?” he asked the Stark Phone he had taken to carrying so Jarvis had a mobile platform out of the tower and his other building bodies.

“Regretfully not, Captain, and there was a rather embarrassing code malfunction in what I uploaded. I do just fine for long stretches then I end a sentence with the wrong cranberry.” The slight hiss of high pitch static was what Steve recognized as a frustrated sigh. Jarvis did it a lot with Tony, who couldn’t hear those pitches. “I’ll work on that.”

“It’s alright Jarvis, work on what you can, try not to get hurt doing it. Everyone else has first aid training in case of injury, but the only one capable of patching you up was last seen fighting fire monsters in Tennessee. I’ll take a team down there to check it out.”

“Steve, you’re running on fumes,” Darcy insisted.

“I’m one of the few who can, Angel. Do you want to stay on Pepper or come with me?”

“I’d feel better with Bucky here, he’s more protective of Maya, and she seems to accept it. Plus I know he’s good with Pepper, the two of them really bonded once he loosened up enough for her to poke him into healthy talking. I can contact him over the swap link if I need to. Bruce should stay, if Maya or Pepper need help with the formula at all he’s the closest we have.”

“But he’s close to Tony,” Steve pointed out. “Practically brothers.”

“Exactly how bad would you flip your lid if it was Jones or Morita or any of them down in Rose Hill?” she asked pointedly. “Bruce stays, I’m not explaining Hulk to already jumpy rednecks.”

“Point taken. Who do have in mind, or just us?”

“Nat and Clint are trained spies, that means seeing stuff we might miss, Army lunks we are.”

“You’re not a lunk Angel, go get our spies and read them in.”

“On it, Cap. Drink some fucking coffee, you look like crap.”

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The entire town of Rose Hill was in shock, the second set of bombings in a year. Nobody really looked too hard at how little Harley Keener had talked to the man who wasn’t from around here, the one who’d got into that fight with the woman who claimed to be from Homeland Security. Just as well, his sister Zoe thought. She didn’t like people looking at her. She hated it. They did it anyway.

Not because she was an X gene mutant, although if she’d really let loose, she was sure they’d look even more. No, just an ordinary congenital defect. She’d spent hours learning the words. She knew the meaning first, it meant she couldn’t hear at all from the ear that was shaped wrong to hold an aid, and she didn’t look like other girls, her smile a bit too wide on her face, her eyes sitting to the side all the time, making her look stupid. She wasn’t stupid. She was actually pretty smart, not that she let the teachers know. The only thing worse than being the deaf weirdo was being the deaf weirdo prodigy. Besides, if she let them get away with their assumptions she got to keep watching cartoons when the other kids started to feel guilty liking them. She liked Dora the Explorer, it was a good starter for Spanish if she had the volume up and her purple aid in the one ear that would hold it.

Being smart, and knowing her brother had gone and done something dumb that required her watch
and an alibi, she saw the strangers pull in. She was watching as they casually talked to people, the brunette buying coffee was chatting with the guy at the counter. The red-head had gone to see the Sheriff, and the big blonde man was helping Mrs. Davis sweep up her front porch and shooting dirty looks at the neighbors for not helping. The smaller blonde man, with the darker hair, wasn’t talking, he was looking. Like she did when she wanted to know the feeling of a conversation before going near it. He saw her. Well, he saw her aid.

*Hi, I’m Clint, this is my name,* he signed, ending on an H tapped by his eye. He did it odd, like he was holding something back by his ear as his fingers tapped.

*I’m Zoe. I don’t have a sign name.*

*Why not? I bet you’d have a very pretty name.*

*Because only my brother signs with me,* she told him.

*I’ll sign with you. My brother sometimes signs, but mostly it’s his wife. Her name is* and he signed an L tracing the path of the sign for mother. *Because she mothers everyone. Although Darcy may be worse, I haven’t worked out a good sign name for her yet.*

*She sounds nice. My mom isn’t that good at it, she doesn’t like I came like this. I think she blamed Dad. He left.*

*You too, huh? Mine didn’t like me and I got the deafness later. Some people aren’t made to be parents. Some are and don’t get a good chance at the right place and time. My partner is like that,* her mom and dad are… *His hands stilled as he thought. Complicated. She’s the red head, her mom is the brunette.*

*They look the same age.*

*Looks can be deceiving, kid, I’m sure you know that.* He signed a name, a mix of signs she didn’t know. *My partner is older.*

*What’s in her name?*

*Oh, we use Russian. It’s Spider,* he signed in ASL. *With some other things. Her mom is Darcy.*

*Weird. She’s older than her mom?*

*Darcy is complicated,* he signed. *Maybe I should do that instead.*

*Instead of what?*

He flashed a sign mixing D’s on both hands with the sign for connection, which he did twice. *So did you see what happened here? I want to find my friend. He made my nice aids and I need one fixed. There may have been an incident with a slice of pizza and a stray dog.*

*Why’s your friend here?*

*Where things blow up rapidly and out of reason, Tony may be nearby. He’s a trouble magnet.* He laughed. *Oh, I gotta remember that one when we talk sign names.*

*Why?* She didn’t see what was funny about a friend who got into too much trouble.

_Iron,* he signed. *It’s part of his spoken name. One of them. Iron Man.*
“You need to talk to my brother. HARLEY!”

“So,” Darcy said, looking at Harley Keener. “You found Tony had broken into your garage and you decided to help him, which is how you got taken prisoner and he blew up half a town?”

“Not… not exactly,” the kid said, shifting in the seat at the diner she’d gotten.

“Then what is exactly?”

“It’s complicated, you wouldn’t get it.”

“Kid, I’m dating Captain America, I’ve known him since we were sixteen. I have kids with Bucky Barnes, and they’re older than me. My brothers are demigods from halfway across the galaxy. I fought in World War Weird, okay? Your problems, they do not impress me. Come back with ‘complicated’ when your issues involve secret government training and enhancement facilities, or time travel, or alien deities.” She took a slug of her milkshake. It was good. So was the look of shock at her utter nonchalance over his situation, not because she didn’t care, but because her own bar for normal was six feet under by now. “At least try me. If you shock me, I’ll buy you and your sister any toy in town.”

“I was trying to help Iron Man. Not his mechanic. They’re different. I don’t trust people, people leave and lie and let you down. I trusted the machines, and they said he was worth trying to repair. I don’t like it when people throw things away that can still be repaired if you work at it. Besides, he might have gotten me out of town. I need to get out of town,” he said lowly.

“Huh, tech whisperer,” Darcy said. “New. I’ve seen metal, and Steve and Buck assure me there was a guy who was basically immortal and grew claws back in the War, but I was busy then. Worried about the power growth spurts?”

He gaped at her and Darcy ate a french fry to hide a grin.

“You’re not upset I’m… y’know?”

“Dude, I was on the front lines of mutant lib before mutant lib was a thing. I was literally liberating, like out of a glass cage. God, I hate Nazis, but then, who doesn’t?” She lifted a shoulder philosophically. “Your Mom and Dad haven’t looked at schools? I hear there are good ones if you look for them. I never needed to, my kids were raised in Communist Russia, where home schools you, but I hear they can be useful.”

“Mom doesn’t know, she can’t. Dad left because she can’t.” His face was dark. Nope, nothing doing, Darcy had to fix this. Looking across the diner she saw Clint animatedly signing with Zoe Keener. The daisies in the vase were turning away from the sun to face her and getting more lively, not less, with each moment, like reverse sped footage of wilting.

“Tell me what Tony wanted you doing and I’ll pay for you both to go to the best one I can find. I know a good lawyer who will take the case that not giving you proper education in ethical use of your powers is neglect if she gets in the way. I’ll pay him too. I just need to make sure Tony’s not gotten himself in too much trouble. If anything happens to Tony, his kid will go off the rails, and that is no good for anyone.”

“His kid?”

“The other guy in the suit. He’s like a reverse you. He’s nice, no hacking him or I put you in tech
timeout. If you don’t think I can, keep in mind I help Tony’s girlfriend keep him practically Amish a minimum of four hours every forty-eight. It helps him sleep if the only tech he has access to is the suit and an erector set kit. Let him near a computer and bam, wide awake. Deal? Info on Tony’s request in exchange for tuition to, hang on a sec,” she paused as her phone vibrated. “Jarvis recommends Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters.”

Harley nodded super fast. “My sister too.”

“If I didn’t my daughter’s circus brat boyfriend would steal her and take her out to his sister-in-law’s farm. Look, they’ve already bonded.” She pointed and Harley’s jaw dropped. “Oh, no. I know that sign. Clint! No.”

“Aww, Darcy,” he whined. She made the two fingered ‘I’m watching you’ gesture.

“So, spill,” she said to Harley, as though she hadn’t just vetoed an idea from two booths away.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Got the com- is listening to a wire in case of emergency.
084- code for the weird, inexplicable shit Coulson’s team looks into for SHIELD.
Null hypothesis- a science term, the null hypothesis is "this is unconnected to our question."
Running on fumes- totally exhausted.
Lunks- dumb muscle, often used for men, but also for Army soldiers in a teasing way.
Read them in- prepare them for the mission.
ASL- American Sign Language (yup it's different by country, just like spoken languages).

Notes:
Stress can be a contributing factor to sleep difficulties, including Steve's normal ability to get rested off a five minute nap. Hence his perception of being more tired than he should be.

A congenital defect is a condition from birth that either impairs or causes total failure (death) in children born with it. Zoe's isn't too bad, she's deaf but can hear with hearing aides, and has a few physical abnormalities like the inability to shift her eyes back to center and a club ear (the one she can't fit a normal aide in).

Being a prodigy is already hard, it gets worse if said prodigy also has some disability. That's when the people who want to get sappy over how you 'overcame your difficulties' come out of the wood work.

Dora the Explorer is an American based cartoon show that teaches basic Spanish skills and was referenced in Iron Man 3 with Harley's sister's watch.

Mrs. Davis is the mother of Chad Davis, the soldier who died from Extremis. Her neighbors shunning her after her son blew up a building fits with what we see if Rose Hill's mentality, but Steve would still call it bullying.

Sign language uses special signs to indicate people, these are sign names. Clint's is the
letter H (the first two fingers together and pointed out, the others and thumb folded) tapped by his eye as he would pull a bow-string. Sign names often use the first letter of the real name and some sign that connects to the personality. In this case H for Hawkeye and the bow action, tapping the eye as a visual pun. Signs as puns are big in deaf communities, and some are even in the language, like the sign for milk passing the face, because it's pasteurized (past your eyes). Zoe does not have a sign name as it isn't that important when you only sign with one person, but Clint feels she should, because it's a big part of the community. Nat's sign name is in RSL, Russian Sign Language, to honor her heritage.

World War Weird is a pretty common name for WWII among the historians who study the less-conventional sides of Hitler's campaign, because he did some bizarre stuff. I would imagine as both a history nerd and a fighter on that front, Darcy would call it that too.

Mutant lib is a riff on Women's lib, the equality movement. I assume in a world with mutants, that would be a thing.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Rhodey calls Darcy for advice on dealing with the crazy you hitch your cart to, and is glad she knows what's up.

Natasha watches everyone handle an unwanted intrusion and is glad Darcy's her mom.

Roy MacBain thinks about his coming role and is glad Darcy Lewis seems like someone he could follow.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To halfelf87, Darylslover33, quadradd, Crystallea1321, ValkyriePhoenix, Notashamed, aquadrop25, Shadows_of_Shemai, Chickalupe, sara47q, SionnachOiche3, Faitheach Saoirse (jaxx), tigrislilium, Beth_Mac, Selene_Aduial, Readertee, JER, and the seven new kudo-ers.

I'm going to take a minute to plug for ValkyriePhoenix's new work Harrowing, which sets the backstory for characters that will be appearing in this story. Go check it out, I'll wait. And as a reminder, we share our toys in this sandbox, what I make and what she makes often wind up crossing borders.

End notes ran long, translations up here.
Arboretum- can reference any large, indoor, live plant display, but Rhodey is referencing the popular 'tree museum' concept, where it's a large green house for endangered trees.
Luthor- this is a reference to Lex Luthor, billionaire super villain in the Superman franchise.
Hot Mama- Pepper's code name,
A flip- someone turned to their side within an agency.
Hidden aces- secret advantages.
Ace- asexual, someone who does not feel sexual attraction to others.
Aro- aromantic, someone who does not feel romantic attraction to others.
Demi- someone who can feel attraction (in this case romantic) to others if they have a solid platonic platform from which to build that feeling.
Commandeered- taken for use by military/law enforcement in case of emergency.
Technically not in this case, as the Avengers are Superheroes not cops, and the bill of rights actually forbids Army commandeering on American soil. Still the best way to communicate the concept.
No better than she should be- an old fashioned (but still in use in isolated areas like rural Tennessee) way of saying a woman is being improper or living down to expectations.
Kitchen- Hell's Kitchen, the neighborhood in New York.
Civvies- soldier slang for civilian clothing and those wearing it.
Plainclothes- a law-enforcement way of saying not in uniform.
The Gaelic conversation translates roughly as "we have a way to show good faith. We can get Barra back. Answer my call when the time for battle arrives." "I understand."
"Call the others." This is spotty translating, if any Scots Gaelic speakers want to correct me, say so.
Wee- small (Scots)
Bairns- children (Scots)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Colonel James Rhodes was no fool, which is why he didn’t even wait a full minute after Tony called in with information and a few small requests for his newest super hero campaign, the one that had him reported dead, yeah that one, to use the secured link Jarvis gave him to call Darcy. It was the mature, responsible thing to do, and therefore Tony had probably not even considered it in his giant guilt-ridden genius brain that was hardly ever set to ‘common sense’. Practical was Rhody’s job in their friendship.

“So, my best friend is a moron with a crusade,” he opened. He knew preliminaries were largely wasted on the strange, authoritative, millennial woman with no military history and a soldier’s humor.

“One, you did not invent that problem, you know who I’m dating. Two, what else is new? He’s been like that for years. Next time you see him, if it’s before I do, tell him I’m using his credit cards to get some mutant kids into a decent school that can handle the power thing, and possibly pay a lawyer to wrest guardianship away from the mom if she decides to get nasty.”

“Who are we talking about again? He won’t care. He’ll probably build them a treehouse. One that takes up a damn arboretum.” Rhody never used Tony’s name in these talks, neither did Darcy. It was a special kind of paranoia when the conversations were so transparent, but it made them feel better with the eyes and ears on Rhody. “He decided to go storming the castle, he gave me coordinates. Advise?”

“We have ourselves a Luthor,” she told him and Rhody thanked God and the guy who sold him his first Superman comic book that he knew her codes. “Hot Mama is on the inside, along with a flip, and we have some hidden aces, but you know him, he’s gotta do this shit alone.” He could practically hear her eyes roll, and the part of him that saw her as a superior officer approved of that unwillingness to send men in without back-up.

“Like hell. I’ll put the toe tag on him myself before he does it alone.”

“Same,” she agreed solemnly. “Is it just me, or are we getting jaded in how crazily destructive our friends are before it phases us?”

“Probably, I’m on approach to the site now. Want me to stay on the line?”

“Yes please, I like healthy communication. It’s the secret to a strong relationship.”

“I do not need to know, thanks.”

“Are you sure, because I still have like an entire five pages left in my book.”

“Woman, I am ace. I do not do that stuff.”

“That’s why there are only five pages left, sheesh, I’m not going to hook you up with somebody with the wrong sexuality, dude, that’s tacky. Unless you’re also aro, if you are I’m totally telling
Clint you stole his spot as the aro-ace. Not because I’m not cool with that if you are, because it’s a horrible pun and I’m not wasting it.”

“I am not aromantic, I’m demi, thank you,” he replied primly, catering to her drier side of humor. “Now tell me what the fuck I’m doing in an empty warehouse.”

“When is a warehouse not a warehouse? To quote Admiral Akbar, it’s a trap,” she said. “Send J your GPS, leave on the com and play dumb.”

Rhodey cussed and activated the tracer in the suit.

Time to follow Tony’s dumb ass into hell again. At least now he had back up when he did that. 
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Natasha watched as her mother, and wasn’t that a new way to think, flipped through code on an old laptop with the same idle elegance of a woman with a catalog. She wondered what was going on in that head. It was either a brilliant plan for saving the day, or an internal debate about whether cranberry would replace raspberry as the new deep color lipstick. There was no real telling when it came to Darcy Lewis. Natasha liked to think she’d inherited that, in the odd sideways relationship she had with her young mother.

Natasha was broken from her reflections when a different mother came into the barn the two young ones has set them up in.

“What are you doing in here?”

Darcy unfolded from her place on the couch, laptop going to the seat cushions gracefully. It took someone with similar skill to see the deadly possibility behind the loose body and simple economy of motion. To see the killer in a ballerina. Natasha doubted the woman had it.

“I was invited, as were my family. Mainly because the other option was attempting to lug half a ton of power armor back to our jet, and it’s just easier to wait for the repairs to finish here.”

“What are you saying?” The woman’s face pinched and Natasha decided she supported Darcy and Clint in the desire to take the children. She reminded Natasha too much of the Headmistress of the Red Room. She was too stern and unyielding, and that was coming from the Russian spy-slash-assassin.

Darcy sighed. “I’m saying that this barn has been commandeered by the Avengers until a wounded teammate recovers. It’s the same for Iron Man as it would be if I got shot in the leg.”

“You ain’t an Avenger. You’re a girl no better than she should be.”

Natasha braced for the easy violence she’d been trained to, but Darcy laughed.

“Dude, what rock were you under during the Battle of New York? I’d like to see you tell the Chitauri I killed that I’m no better than I should be, I bet it would keep them from ever wanting to come back, even if my best friend and my brothers made it so they can’t. Don’t you think, Nat?”

“Hmm,” Natasha gave it due thought. “I still say footage out of the Kitchen is a superior deterrent. There was a woman in very good recreation 1400’s English Infantry armor and a sword. I liked her.”

“Nope, my money is on Hulk,” Clint added. “He punched out a space eel.”
“I still say Jane,” Steve added. “Not everyone will fall two stories through a collapsed floor, break a leg, convince the world’s most massive seven-year-old to pass her a gun, use it to shoot mercenaries, then play with the crumpled remains of what once was a mercenary’s large gun while singing the periodic table of elements. And she’s not even one of our combatants. Fighters are an obstacle, but civilians? When you get the civvies fighting back, you leave. Why do you think Hydra never made it that far into Romania? Those resistance movements were brutal.”

“Point,” Darcy said. “Can I restate a previous entry of field hockey girls?”

“No reiteration,” Clint reminded her. “Once you change it you cannot go back.”

“Fine, roller derby,” Darcy said. The woman was looking at them like they’d gone insane. Natasha blinked.

“We’re in plainclothes,” she noted and Steve slapped his head. He reached behind him and hauled out the shield, holding it up.

“Sorry Ma’am. We forget we aren’t in a war zone sometimes.”

“I don’t care what nifty hunk of metal you have, you freaks keep away from my kids! Harley, Zoe, we’re leaving. I’ll call the sheriff’s office in the house.”

“No, you won’t, Mom,” Zoe Keener said in that flat way people born deaf can have, her face angled to put her eyes at her mother. “Heroes need saving too, sometimes. We’re helping. If you try to hurt them, I’ll stop you.”

“Zoe! It is not like you to be this ungrateful. I am your mother and you don’t stop me. In fact, I’d like to see you try, young lady!” Abruptly, she tripped, and a thick vine hauled her back.

“Did you know kudzu can lie dormant for several years? I did. I’m helping them and going to school in New York, and so is Harley.”

“You freak!” the outraged woman burst out, but before she could get much farther, Steve was across the barn, looming with shield in hand.

“Never,” he said darkly, “speak to your children like that again. Mutants have saved my life, fought and died for freedoms you take for granted. If anyone here is being ungrateful, it’s you. Get. Out.” He stepped back and nodded to Zoe who dropped the vines.

“You’ll need to cut them back now. I don’t know how to ungrow things, and we’ll all be trapped in an hour if we leave it. Kudzu is fast.”

Natasha pushed off the wall. “I will go. May I use this axe?”

Harley nodded and she got to work, ignoring the retreating woman. Thank the lord her mother only ever embarrassed her by being too lovey. Those kids deserved better.

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Roy MacBain looked at the file he’d been passed through untraceable channels in the internet. He knew they were untraceable, he recognized the hand that coded them, nobody ever broke those, although how that hacker had ended up with the establishment, he’d never know. The file was on a woman who might be called on to give him orders in the next few days, as the foundations of his current employer’s power were shaken. The one he’d have to follow, if he ever wanted to get Barra out of prison to see his children and their mother, to be able to protect them. Darcy Lewis.
Strong fighter, she, he decided not from the reports, which were thin, but from the way she moved in the video footage attached to the source-less email. She cut through crowds like a sheepdog cuts through a herd. Good ability to lead the willing but terrified, he saw in the report from New Mexico. Not prone to letting panic affect her work. An even better ability to work alongside the highly trained though, he thought, based on the fact that New York still existed and she’d fought then.

Yes, she could tell him where to strike and when, and he’d likely do it, as she didn’t seem to get picky about how her orders got done, as long as they did get done. And she was friendly with legends and beasts, so she probably wouldn’t care what he looked like while he did the job. He stepped out for a smoke break even though he didn’t smoke, and dialed a number.

“S’e seo Roy, feumaidh sinn dòigh a’ sealltainn deagh rùn. Gheibh sinn air ais Barra, nuair a Freagair mo ghairm an àm airson am b làr a ’ruighinn.”

“Tha mi gad thuigsinn,” his cousin’s voice said.

“Call na feadhainn eile.”

“Hey MacBain, stop speaking that jaw breaker gibberish and get back in here,” his supervisor called from the door. Roy hung up and headed in, head above the man who gave his orders, for the moment, anyway. That was likely to change suddenly in his near future. There were definitely worse people to turn on than this weak, wee little excuse for a man, he decided.

Probably, the woman he’d bartered some service to was one. As Kipling had noted long ago, the females of any species tended to be more dangerous than the males. And Roy MacBain of the great, if somewhat diminished lately, Clan MacBain hadn’t lived this long by discounting that. Neither had his brother which was why he was in jail, not a coffin. Only the handsome turncoat lass he’d fallen head over heels for, enough to be arrested by, was now in the sights of a worse enemy and if he knew his brother, he’d never forgive it if Roy didn’t do everything he could to let Barra see his lass safe in person, let alone the wee bairns she’d born him. Roy personally felt that she was more than capable of defending herself and the children as well if they held any of Clan MacBain’s blood. He didn’t say so to his brother, though. As any old woman of Scotland could tell you, if you want to win, you never argue with women, crazy people, or men in love. An argument flitted in his head that the last was a form of the second, but the saying stood.

Time to get to work.

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
Yes, Darcy keeps a book of all the single people she knows for matchmaking purposes.

Aro-ace means Aromantic Asexual, but it sounds like ‘arrow ace’ a name for a master archer.

I headcanon Rhodey as a Demi-romantic Asexual for a number of reasons, most of which will devolve into me pulling up screen clips of the first move and going ”SEE!” if I go into them. Just accept the representation and move on.

Economy of motion is the practice of getting from position A to position B swiftly and
without any extra movement to do so. Dancers, notably ballerinas, and skilled martial artists tend to cultivate it as a habit. Other skilled martial artists or dancers can tell what type of economy of motion is what, but your average person isn't going to see it as anything odd.

The reference Nat makes about the recreation armor is to another work of mine, Chapel of the Damned, which while not in the series can be considered canon. The work deals with grief, loss and memory, as such it is very raw emotionally, check your headspace before reading it.

I know they are called 'leviathans' in canon, but I still call the flying worm-ship things 'space eels' and because I can, so does Clint. Other people can call them by the formally adopted name.

Romanian resistance movements in WWII were brutal, both in the vicious way the violent parts were done, and in the use of local legends and the general opinion of Romania as a place Weird Shit Happens to turn mutilation of corpses and other messed up stuff into nightmare fuel, more than ordinary. At least one squad disobeyed orders and left because they had been convinced by the Romanian people that wolf-men and vampires lived nearby and were too smart to stay after the CO was drained of blood with ice-pick holes in his neck. Fuck with Romania, and Romania will fuck with you, only harder.

Field hockey (or lacrosse) and roller derby are sports that both have mostly women teams and are known for brutality and savageness in play.

Deaf people who have never been fully hearing have occasional difficulty making their spoken words sound right to hearing people. If you want a good example of how it sounds, put on headphones playing white noise loudly, record yourself saying a few phrases, then take the headphones off and play it back to yourself.

Abusers, especially if the target has a disability, tend to squash rebellion against abuse by framing it as 'being ungrateful' and implying the victim should be happy they get anything from the abuser. This is particularly harmful to children.

Kudzu is a fast growing plant in the South that can in fact lay dormant for years in drought conditions and in good growing conditions, cover entire houses in a few hours. It's terrifying, and you can see houses covered by it completely dotted like Lovecraft's shambling horrors across the rural south.

Clan MacBain is ValkyriePhoenix's creation, but Roy is my character within it. Barra MacBain is hers. Read Code Chartreuse and Harrowing by her for more details on them.

Teaser:

"I find the face of the Mandarin, find Iron Benedict Arnold, get civilians to safety, call you. I got this," he finished.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Darcy worries about Maya, worries she spooked the kids, and then informs them they just got a family.

Steve makes sure the kids get protected, helps Darcy talk to her people, and forms a plan.

Bucky sees a new side to Maya, accepts the old side of Clint, and prepares to hurry up and wait.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Darylslover33, halfelf87, Maharet, ValkyriePhoenix, Shadows_of_Shemai, sara47q, tigrislilium, Joey99, quadrad, SionnachOiche3, Crystallea1321, Selene_Aduial and the 4 new kudo-ers.

As the Holidays approach, my body has decided to do that lovely thing where there is just not enough cold medicine in the world to handle the symptoms tossed at me. As a result, this may be the last post of the week, if not the year. Now I go to take a hot shower in hopes that opens up my sinuses. Thank you for your patience and understanding.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy coached Rhodey through being captured, then ordered him to bail out of the overheating suit in the same voice that had once gotten Dugan to shut up and bring her bandages when she and Steve insisted on stopping to help the pregnant wife of a German officer give birth.

He hadn’t liked leaving the suit, but he must have realized she was right in saying while they could get Tony to replace it, but they could not replace him.

She watched the pieces of the newest armor streak across the sky as she loaded the last of the Keener children’s things into the jet. They were going to swing north to drop the kids off safely with Betty at the Tower, then double back for the main fight.

Maya had been radio silent, and it was starting to worry her. She tried everything to relax, but got nowhere. Finally, Steve gave up on trying to let her work it out and unbuckled from the five-point flight harness he was wearing (the kids were watching, and he believed in good examples for all he was willing to be a reckless asshole when it was just other adults) and moved to bury her face in his chest.

“You will survive this,” he told her.

“My baby is radio silent, Steve. She has the least training of all of them, she’s not as fast at healing,
“And she’s alone.”

“Pepper has no training, no enhanced healing, and is also alone,” he countered.

“That’s different. Pepper is a stone cold badass, and I’ve never seen her be anything else. Vikitsa is my baby girl. You can’t treat someone you got through nightmares and math homework with the same objective distance.”

“From the things I’ve heard about where you had to raise them, I’m not sure the math homework wasn’t scarier,” he said with an exaggerated shudder. She slapped his arm and he laughed. She smiled at him.

“You’re a dork.”

“Your dork?”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “My dork. Mine and Bucky’s. You really think she’s going to be okay?”

“If not, we’ll go in and make her okay.” He rubbed gentle circles on her back. “I won’t let her down, if only because then you and Pepper will have to play rock, paper, scissors to decide who gets Killian. I don’t want that, I think it will involve too many actual rocks and sharp objects. And I have this feeling Pepper knows how to make paper dangerous.”

Darcy let out a short bark of laughter. “Pepper’s too classy. I’d be starting my throw and she’d have already shot him. You do realize she took out Stane and Hammer, not Tony, right? She blew Stane into bits with a building sized arc reactor, and did a citizen’s arrest of Hammer while the droids at the Expo were going off the rails.”

“I know, I listen to Tony too, Darcy. And hey, you know Pepper thinks that Maya’s a real pip, she’s not going to let your daughter get hurt.”

“True. Wake me when we get close to the tower. Or Maya’s com comes back online. Whichever happens first,” she said as she snuggled into his arms.

“Should you really have been saying all that in front of us?” Zoe Keener asked.

“Aww, crud,” Darcy sighed. Life had not prepared her to raise kids. Outside of a scary superspy manufacturing plant of a training program, that is. “Sorry, I raised my kids in Assassin Prep, I forget not all kids are as okay with my job as that.”

“I almost strangled my mom with a plant that eats houses,” Zoe deadpanned. “I meant, isn’t that all classified or something? I’m not sure two random kids you offered to take to a school are supposed to know that kind of stuff.”

“Oh, kiddo, you aren’t just hitching a ride, we’re adopting you. You deserve a real parent and society failed to give you one since you’re different, so we’re giving you a ton of them. It’s what we do,” Darcy explained. “Fix the things other people won’t or can’t.”

“And that makes you family,” Steve added. “So, you are entitled to know what’s going on with your Aunt Maya and how much we worry. How else will you know we take care of our kids right? If we still worry when they’ve grown up and go off to take on supervillains, imagine how much we will care about you while you grow into your powers.”

“You people are weird,” Harley Keener added, his voice filled with more awe than the phrase usually held. “I like it.”
“Good, because it’s a little late to fix us, we aren’t changing now,” Darcy quipped. As always, her irreverence made her heart a little lighter as she dropped into a light doze.

Steve smiled at Betty when her eyes went hard as Harley Keener explained the situation to her. She was so compassionate, he bet a lot of people thought she was weak, a doormat to be walked on, but he’d also bet a fair number of people lived to regret those thoughts. Betty wasn’t violent, not in the ways Darcy and Natasha were, comfortable with the many ways they had to take apart a human body like stewed chicken, but she was no push-over either. She had that same core of emotional strength he saw in Hulk, and paired it with the sharp intelligence she shared with Bruce. It was no wonder she fell for Bruce, he thought, he had all the best parts of her hidden in himself, and she saw it, even when he hid it. Steve didn’t buy the line about opposites attracting, outside of magnets anyway. His own loves held the best parts of him, they pushed him to want to show those parts more, prove the things they shared with him existed, just by being themselves. And he could see where Darcy and Bucky shared things as well, where they helped each other be stronger.

As Betty walked off with the kids, the wall Zoe’s eyes fell on illuminated with projected letters relaying Betty’s words, Steve’s phone rang.

“Darcy, it’s Maya, I’m putting her on speaker.”

“Devochka, are you alright?” Darcy said the moment the screen showed the call was open.

“Let it be known, bullet proof vests are a figment of Hollywood imagination, and Kevlar does not make a shot to the ribs hurt less. But nothing’s broken, it’s just not working.” Steve frowned at the phrase, but Darcy’s face relaxed. “Speak to boy blunder, I need to take the antidote to the experimental epinephrine replacement I injected myself with.”

“Uh,” Tony said. “Why don’t I remember Maya being this hardcore and when did you start using Russian pet names with her?”

“How secure is the room?”

“Pretty secure, it’s not been zappered though.”

“Maya went to Nat’s alma mater.”

“Oh, gotcha. How did I not see that? Oh, wait, duh, you didn’t want me seeing it, so I didn’t.”

“Hey, look,” Steve ribbed, “he can be taught!” Darcy giggled and Steve smiled before getting serious. “Why didn’t you call us, Tony? We would have helped, you’re our family, you loon.”

“And that worked out great for my other family,” Tony snapped. “Rhodey had to take that stupid paint job to stay in the Air Force because I’m not selling weapons to his bosses, Happy almost died…”

“And none of it was your fault. You have a martyr complex, and I say this as a practicing Catholic,” Steve said. “Trust me, when Steve Rogers of the Great Brooklyn Crusades tells you that you’re taking on too much responsibility for things not done by you, you know it’s time to get off the cross and let someone else take a crack at it. We would have helped you, we did help you, you just made it hard and annoying, although you did locate some nice kids.”

Darcy’s phone rang. She answered it, listened, then leaned over the phone Steve was holding as Tony tried to rationalize. “Did anybody at a nice mansion complex order a freshly un-ironed
patriot? If not, you also have ‘splaining to do for Rhodes.”

“Rhodey’s here?”

“Yup, hang on, I’m putting us in group,” she said and did a quick motion on her phone before tapping it to Steve’s. “Rhodey, you’re live.”

“Barely, did you know this guy breathes fire? He breathes fire Tony! I am not ok with this kind of weird, because he breathes fire and he took my suit. He took War Machine, Tony.”

“No,” Steve said in a horrible moment of realization. “He took Iron Patriot.”

“That’s a horrible name,” Tony said.

“It’s a name that’s on the guest list for the White House and Air Force One, Tony. The quality of the name is not what matters to Killian, the doors it opens do,” Maya said over some distance. “He’s going to target Obama, that’s what the scripts have said. He’s getting more aggressive.”

“Shit,” Darcy swore.

“Um, who’s the other woman on the line?” Rhodes asked.

“Oh, hi, Doctor Maya Hansen. I accidentally made human beings into high power bombs and my boss shot me a few minutes ago, so I’m a little scattered. Damn it’s been forever since I was on an op.”

“Hey, you’re twenty-seven years out of practice,” Darcy consoled. “We all get rusty. You never liked active ops anyways. What are our next steps?” she asked Steve.

“We need to isolate the source of those broadcasts, take the face of the Mandarin out of play.” Steve’s mind blurred through tactical options. “Find out where the Iron Patriot is, get there and assume everyone nearby is in danger. We won’t know what to do or where to go until then. Coordinate on your end with J-coms,” he instructed, using the code name for the small encrypted communication devices Jarvis ran for them in the field.

“Sorry, but I’m fresh out of tech, Cap,” Tony said, settling under the commands. He always took a moment of irreverent banter before getting to work. It almost made Steve miss Dugan and Morita’s ritual pre-battle bickering, and the inevitable filthy joke in French from Dernier. Almost.

“Like Mom and Dad would send me in unprepared,” Maya said scornfully. “Meet us at the ugly fountain, Colonel Rhodes, I’ll get us equipped even if I’m not good for active duty yet. I hate getting shot in center mass. So inconvenient, and they never do it when you have time to just take a nice nap.”

“Yes Ma’am, Doctor Hansen. Rhodes out.”

“You know what we need,” Steve supplied, “get on it, you two. Oh, and Tony, we hired a lawyer to argue a custody case for the kid who helped you in Rose Hill and his sister using your money. We’re also getting them enrolled in a specialized school using it. Sorry, not sorry.”

“What in the…” Steve could hear Tony’s brain grind to a halt on the twenty things he was worrying over. “Never mind that, I find the face of the Mandarin, find Iron Benedict Arnold, get civilians to safety, call you. I got this,” he finished.

“Good, Captain America out.” He hung up before Tony could realize he purposely dropped that
bomb to force Tony out of guilt and into action.

“‘You’re sexy when you’re sneaky, Rogers,’” Darcy said with a wink as they put their phones away. “Let’s roll.”

“You got it, Angel.”

Bucky was happy to get the clear from Maya, less happy when Natasha and Darcy carried her into the hotel in a two-person evacuation hold.

“Nat, Mom, seriously, it wasn’t even high caliber! I can walk. I walked to the rendezvous.”

“Shut up and let me love you,” Darcy ordered. “Bed, food, we’ll find you a good doctor soon. You’re lucky I didn’t just take you to the Tower.”

“Mooom,” Maya whined, the very picture of a petulant pre-teen.

“What did you give her?” Bucky asked Steve. Not a lot could put his girls that deep into their childhoods, non-existent as they were.

“Prescription strength Tylenol. She mostly burned through it on the flight, I think. Clint says this is normal for people in pain who have a parent or something close caring for them.”

“Oh yeah, Cooper goes as bad as Lila when he’s losing a baby tooth,” Clint filled in. “Whining is a way to attract attention, even if you feel like it’s silly to want. There’s some plausible deniability to it asking for your parents to come make everything better doesn’t have. If the parents don’t, it’s not because they can’t or won’t, it’s because the kid didn’t ask. Good parents will try, even if they know they can’t fix it all, and seeing that reaffirms the child’s ability to trust in the caretaking.”

“That sounded like a textbook,” Bruce noted.

“It should, I was paraphrasing. Seriously, you think I was gonna let my sister raise her kids alone? Or with a totally ignorant pseudo Dad? Dude, have you met me? It’s not like I wanted to use mimicking. My Dad was awful. Why do you think I ran away and joined a circus as a child?”

“To be honest,” Bucky said carefully, “I wasn’t sure that you did run away to join a circus. It seemed implausible and I assumed Nat was letting you cover for something embarrassing.”

“Nope, actual carnie,” Clint assured him with visible pride. Bucky suddenly found himself reevaluating every conversation with Clint where the circus came up. It all hung together far too well to be a lie.

“Huh. What’s our move?” He looked at both Darcy and Steve, as either one could be running the op now that Tony had been found.

“Tony and Rhody are looking for the face of the Mandarin, and the stolen Iron Patriot armor, and will contact us when they know where we’re going,” Steve said.

“Ah, hurry up and wait detail.” Bucky nodded. That was an old game from the War days, and by game, he meant form of bureaucratic torture on par with medical supply requisitions.

“Yup, sadly.”

“It’s a chance to catch a minute or two of fucking sleep,” Darcy said. “Enjoy it while it lasts.”
“Amen,” Bruce and Clint chorused.

“Dibs on the second bed!” Clint cried and Bucky rolled his eyes but said nothing as Natasha went with him. She deserved a little softness. And modern beds felt like marshmallows, anyways. He could totally handle kipping down on a thick blanket in the corner with Darcy and Steve. In fact, it was all he wanted.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Radio silent- not communicating while in the field.
Vikitsa- Darcy's pet name for Maya.
A real pip- a treat, a wonderful person.
Devochka- baby-girl (Russian)
'splaining- just a purposeful mispronunciation of 'explaining', lifted from the TV show I Love Lucy.
High caliber- large bullet size.
Kipping down- to lay down to sleep, British slang that came home with American soldiers post WWII.

Notes:
It really is very different to objectively weigh the abilities of someone close to you.
You'll either want to see them as better and more special or as smol and needing help.
Some people can gain that ability to see their kids as the full humans they are and weigh their strength accurately. Darcy is not one of them, for all she is a brilliant strategist about other people's strengths.

Rock, paper, scissors is a form of zero-sum game, 'throwing' out hand signs to determine a winner.

Betty is a walking example of "do not mistake my kindness for weakness." She is equally strong as Hulk, just in a different way, using a more passive 'unmovable object' strength paired with a high EQ (emotional intelligence). In many ways, Hulk shows the parts of Bruce that he has in common with Betty more clearly than Bruce himself does.

"Opposites attract" is not always that true. While that sort of relationship can be fun and exciting and some people make it work, it's easier to form strong bonds where fundamentally things are the same. My Mom and Dad were great examples of this for me, superficially total opposites (democrat and republican, Catholic and follower of a guru, vegetarian and a meat lover) but sharing the important stuff (smarts, kindness, emotional intelligence and strength, a strong work ethic).

'Bullet proof' vests are not as much bullet proof as bullet resistant, and getting shot will always hurt, no matter what ballistic protection you have. That said, they can save your life.

"It's not broken, it's just not working," is a common Russian joke based on their language which has two ways of saying broken, one meaning 'will never work again' and the other meaning 'not working now'. The first is often translated as broken, the second as not working.
In the movie Maya injects herself with Extremis to threaten Aldritch Killian. This Maya would never do that, so I'm saying she had a side project of a better Epi-pen (epinephrine as is used to treat anaphylaxis) and used that in a fake out, with a Kevlar vest under it in case he shot her to short out the reaction.

Alma maters are the schools people consider their 'home' school, even if they no longer live there. In this case, "Natasha's alma mater" only means anything to close family.

"Get off the cross and let someone else take a crack at it," is actually a thing my Catholic mother says. It's not disrespectful in large chunks of Catholic culture to use comparison to early martyrs or even to Jesus as a way of pointing out someone taking more than their fair share of blame.

I don't know of any phones that can transfer calls to three way calling like this, but I know of phones that can transfer files like pictures or contact info this way, I'm just assuming StarkTech is better than what's on the market.

Benedict Arnold is famous in American history as our first traitor, who sold military secrets to the British government during the Revolution. He was turned while in Washington's ranks, so he does not count as a foreign spy, but as a traitor to his people. Hence the re-purposed Iron Patriot becoming Iron Benedict Arnold.

A two-person evacuation hold places the clasped arms of the two people doing the carrying under the thighs and at the back of the person being carried, so that person is sort of sitting.

What Clint says about whining is true. If you want to get a child to stop whining as it hurts the ears, teach them that they will more likely get what they want, when they want by explaining the desire clearly to an adult. Even then it won't work if they're embarrassed by what they want, say the fussing of the mother, so it won't vanish entirely even then. If the whining is not about wanting things, it's more than likely a desire for attention, and giving it to them will not 'encourage' the behavior. Trying not to encourage whining by avoiding giving attention often does more harm than good.

Mimicking is a way of using your own experience with parents to parent your own child. This either works really well, or backfires into a chain of abuse. Clint wisely avoids that with his sister-in-law's kids.

Hurry up and wait is a common soldier's slang for the parts of war that are really dull. You can't move to fight yet, you can't totally unwind like on leave, you're stuck waiting, needing to be ready on a moment's notice.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Darcy rallies the troops as the final battle with the Mandarin kicks off.

Steve meets Colonel James Rhodes and finds an unexpected ally in his annoyance.

Bucky spends some quality time with Clint and learns some things.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Beth_Mac, Snowecat, halfelf87, Darylslover33, Shadows_of_Shemai, quadrad, Notashamed, Joey99, ValkyriePhoenix, SionnachOiche3, Selene_Aduial, rosiedeplume, Matlida_Nicki, Alex, and the eight new kudo-ers.

Thank you to everyone who has been so patient with me during the holiday season. You guys rock.

Be aware the blocking here is not at all what happened in the movie, because Tony now has a larger set of teamwork skills and the knowledge the Avengers are coming, so he's picking a better attack pattern than 'run in basically unarmed and try not to die.' It's a ripple thing and will change much of what happened in canon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy was nudged awake gently with a bottle of cold herbal tea and a phone. She thankfully slugged back the grassy tasting stuff Bruce prepped and drank in place of coffee or harsh stimulants and checked the phone, which had a text from Jarvis. Considerate of him, not to disturb anyone with a vocal call when they were tired.

Sir has new information; President Obama has been taken by the hijacked Iron Patriot armor to the Norco oil tanker. We request all available back up, sooner rather than later.

“Thank you, J,” Darcy said to the phone, knowing the odds of it doing anything were slim with his focus on his Dad. Turning, she poked a still sleeping Bucky in the ticklish spot over his ribs. “Up and at ’em soldier boy, we got work.”

“Gah, my mouth feels like something died in it.”

“Use some mouthwash and suck it up, buttercup, the President was kidnapped, we need to move.”

“Fine, fine, I’m moving,” he groused. She knew he wasn’t really that mad, but complaining in the morning helped him anchor to the here and now. The Squids never would have let him bitch about waking up. She smiled and pushed up to stand and look at Bruce, who had handed her the bottle of tea and the phone.
“Steve ready?”

“Yeah, I woke him first, since you have the easiest circadian rhythm to mess up. You needed as much sleep as you could get.”

“Totally, thank you. Speaking of that, are you okay coming with us? You’ve been on the com for a while now. Rest is, as I so often remind Jane, a thing.”

“Oh, I know,” he reassured her with a dry grin. “And we won’t be going with, I consulted the Big Guy. While he’s willing to just about walk into hell for you all, especially you and Tony, the tanker Jarvis pointed us to has crude oil in it. We both know Hulk has a hard time not doing collateral damage and neither of us is willing for that damage to be, and this is a quote, ‘all the nice fishies and water plants’. I didn’t know he was eco-friendly, but apparently, he likes wildlife.”

“Well, we knew he was green,” Darcy said shrugging. “I bet we could use him for PR later, hook you guys up with like Audubon or Sierra Club to do a thing about being nice to the planet. Hulk covered in tiny songbirds would do a lot for his rep, and I know he can stay still enough they perch on him, I’ve seen it. Or something like that. I dunno, I just woke up.”

“We like Project Greenworld, it’s run by kids, so Hulk doesn’t feel as left out of things as the more adult oriented stuff.”

“Good, when this is over we can put together an email asking if Hulk can go help. In the meantime, go home and sack out for like, at least twelve hours. You look like six miles of bad road.”

“Thanks Darcy, I will. I’ll be taking Doctor Hansen with me, the Tower has the stuff to give her a new life, since Killian basically flushed her old one. Before you say it, yes, I know she’s invited to stay as long as she wants, but I know a mind like that isn’t going to be happy hiding with us. She needs a scientific alias to work under or she’ll lose it.’”

“Good man,” Bucky rumbled as he clapped Bruce on the arm. “Take care of her.”

“I will. I hope leaving you without our two heaviest hitters isn’t a problem.”

“I have options,” Darcy assured him. “Go take my kid to the Tower.” He nodded and grabbed his go-bag to take to the car they’d rented. She didn’t see Maya, so she assumed her daughter was in that car already.

“What now?” Bucky asked her.

“Now, I make calls and you get everyone battle ready into the jet.” Bucky snapped a sassy salute and she stuck her tongue out at him before dialing the number Phil gave her for the inside guy.

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Steve dropped out of the jet onto the deck of the Norco in time to backhand a glowing guard into the water with his shield before the guy leapt to the hovering jet like he seemed to be planning on. The fire wasn’t that unusual for him, the African American man in the polo shirt reloading his sidearm was a bit new, though.

“Colonel,” he said respectfully, tapping up a salute. Rhodes blinked at him.

“I’m pretty sure Captain America only has to salute the flag, man.”

“You do outrank me, sir,” Steve pointed out. He took Rhodes small nod as permission to be at ease
and tossed the shield into a three-ricochet path that took down four Extremis enhanced soldiers.

"Where do you need me to get you?  I’m on escort."

"The President is up there," Rhodes said, gesturing with his gun.  "And please don’t ever call me sir again, it’s freaking me out.  My name is Rhodey."

"Okay, I can do that.  I’ll clear you a path and we can haul him down together."

"Sounds good.  Tony’s on the opposite side of the tanker."

"We know, Lieu’s on it.  Hawkeye’s finding a good perch with our back-up sniper and when she’s done dropping them off, Widow will be heading to Pepper’s location.  We do pretty well at the team work thing, you know, when we actually get invited to the party."

"Yeah, I’m still pissed Tony made my invitation fashionably late," Rhodley said as Steve tossed his shield again, clearing a landing and knocking out someone approaching from the flank.  "You didn’t happen to bring Hulk did you?"

"Oil tanker," Steve explained.  "Big guy didn’t want to risk it."

"Big guy or Banner?" Rhodley asked with keen insight into how the team worked.  Steve supposed Tony would have shared Bruce’s unfortunate fear of his larger half with his best friend, although the parts of him that played Darcy’s shadow game hated that it was known outside the group at all.

"Both, actually.  Hulk likes animals, oil spills hurt animals, and he tends to do best with inanimate object smashing, and that’s less than ideal for protecting animals when you fight on an oil tanker."

"Really?"

"Tony got him a subscription to one of those animal magazines marketed to kids for Christmas this year.  He got Bruce a gizmo I can’t actually pronounce the name of."

"Huh," Rhodley said as he shot a new guard.  "That’s strangely thoughtful, seeing as he had no clue what to get Pepper."

"If he’s anything like his father, his gifts to friends will make sense and his gifts to women will either be needlessly flashy and expensive, not what anyone would call a thoughtful gift, or both.  He gave Peggy a set of real silk stockings once in the War.  She didn’t wear silk unless completely necessary for a mission.  If I recall, that’s why she hit him in the head with the butt of the trophy pistolet that Jones and Denier gave her.  And I thought I was bad when it came to dames."

"Wow, that was a horrible choice for her.  I only met her once, when Tony and I were in school together, but I can tell you she was not the woman you by personal items for.  She struck me as a weapons, booze and gift cards to knitting shops kind of lady."

"Pretty much.  Although I never saw her knit."

"I think she learned so she could hide shivs in her purse without anyone asking why she needed a pointed, ten inch long, hardened bamboo stake."

"Ah, that would explain it.  Duck," Steve instructed, hauling Rhodley behind the shield to ricochet a bullet back at a team of soldiers.  They reached the President, hanging in the Iron Patriot armor and Steve took up a guard post while Rhodes snapped into a more serious mode to evacuate the Commander in Chief.
Bucky slipped into the mind of the Soldier easily, although that was expected, he had been that man longer than he’d been James ‘Bucky’ Barnes, at least on paper. The enhanced soldiers provided an interesting mix of challenge and ease. They moved faster than any other targets he could recall, but they glowed like signal beacons, but they also wouldn’t go down for long unless he really focused his shots to be lethal. It was… interesting. Broke up the monotony of the sniper’s job.

“Man, this shit is weird shit, and I’m on Delta Squad,” Clint bitched good-naturedly. He also knew it was important to keep the mind flexible while on the job, he just did it differently. Probably because most of his handlers wouldn’t punish him for speaking as long as it didn’t mess up the job. “We handle weird shit on Delta, I was on the ground when Thor landed and this shit is out-weirding my normal weirdness.”

“Suck it up, buttercup,” Bucky shot back. “Damn, I’m starting to sound like Darcy.”

“That’s a good thing,” Clint said. “It’s like people who look like their pets, we unconsciously mirror those we love most. I didn’t wear leather for SHIELD work at all until I met Nat and we started working together. I was strictly a tee shirt and combat pants guy, maybe a ballistic vest if needed, but she was getting crap for her choices in uniform modification, so I ordered specialty tack leather online, and made a new get-up in purple leather so they’d have a different, more appealing, target. She orders pizza the way I order it, pepperoni and extra sauce, even though outside of pizza you have to hold a gun to her head to get her to eat processed meats. I tolerate mushrooms and pineapple on pizza because she likes the extra mix of flavors and textures. I didn’t see any of that stuff as that odd until Phil pointed it out. He said it showed a good level of willingness to fit each other into our lives.”

“Huh, that actually makes sense. Wow, I just realized, my son-in-law is giving me dating advice.”

“Wait, what? Son in… no, I’m not married to Nat. I think she’d kill me for proposing, actually, she hates the institution of marriage with the blinding intensity of a thousand dying stars.”

“Yeah. I know, that’s why you aren’t my future son-in-law. You’re as married to her as I am to Steve and Darce, and I had it pointed out recently you don’t have to have said the vows in order to have done the vows. Or would you not do the whole ‘in sickness and in health, for better or worse, richer or poorer, so long as you both shall live’ jazz?” He made sure to put the inflection that conveyed a warningly raised eyebrow on the question.

“Nat’s going to have to actually follow through on one of her bi-monthly death threats to get rid of me now,” Clint said with a tone that communicated his internal eye roll, without looking away from their targets. Bucky heard the click of the coms going on. “Hey, bets on what happens if I shoot a flame-stopper arrow at them?”

“It acts like a glue trap until they break it off, five bucks,” he said.

“Leaves them unable to use the fire punching thing, also five,” Darcy chimed in.

“It does nothing and I stab you to death with a grapefruit spoon when we go home,” Natasha said.

“Love you too, Nat-Nat.” The bow string hummed and a distant fizz was heard. “Aww futz. Nat wins.”

“I always win.”

“Stop being smug Pauk,” Bucky chided. “Do you have eyes on Pepper?”
“Yes, and she is very impressive. We’ll need to get her more training, but I’m quite proud of how she’s handling being enhanced.”

“What?!!?” demanded every voice on the line.

“You didn’t know?” she asked calmly, betraying her surprise to those who knew her.

“Communication, Pauk, it’s a thing,” he growled into the line, firing another head shot. “So is tact.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Sack out- get solid sleep.
Look like six miles of bad road- look worn down or tired.
Go-bag- the bag prepared to take only what you need.
At ease- in this case, simply not saluting, Steve is already less formal here because battle zone.
Shivs- in this case, a weapon made by sharpening something to a point.
Commander in Chief- The President of the United States.
Nat-Nat- Clint's affectionate term for Natasha.
Futz- a non-swear expletive used by Clint. In meta, because Marvel can't market too many swears to an all ages audience, but in my canon because he hangs out with Ciara's kids and doesn't want to make her mad.
Pauk- spider (Russian). A pet name for Nat that both Bucky and Darcy use.

Notes:
There are many natural alternatives to caffeine or energy drink ingredients that are not as harsh on the body. Given Bruce's sensitivity in canon to heart rate and adrenaline changes, I doubt he'd want to be drinking the hard stuff, so I headcanon him as having an extensive repertoire of herbal mixes.

Circadian rhythms are natural sleep patterns, and some people are prone to having them disturbed, while others can go off pattern a few days without that many side effects.

Bruce, like many scientists, has trained himself to be able to go long stretches without sleep, or with only naps, but unlike Jane and Tony, does keep an eye on when that's no longer sustainable.

Hulk in the MCU always runs toward nature when fleeing a threat. He has, on-screen, hit up a jungle, a temperate forest, and a boreal forest (Sokovia is shown to be nearest to that biome when he runs in AoU). Thus my headcanon that he is uniquely aware of what wildlife wants and needs, and is touchy about safe habitats being endangered.

Audubon, Sierra Club, and Project Greenworld are all internationally recognised ecological protection organizations, and PGW is run by kids. Check them out, they're all cool orgs to work with.

Polo shirts like Rhodey wears in IM3 are way unusual and useless in a battle zone. So to be clear, Rhodey's race is a descriptor, his shirt is a weirdness factor, not the reverse.

Colonels do outrank Captains, and even in a mildly dangerous situation (for Steve, this
is mild) showing respect up the chain of command with a short salute and the honorific 'sir' are good form. In a peaceful situation, Steve would wait for verbal permission to relax, but given the circumstances, he takes the acknowledgement that his salute was seen and understood.

Rhodey, while Air Force and not Army, was raised up in the military on tales of Captain America. He sees Steve's experience topping his rank, even though the labels are the opposite. Steve on the other hand, is still working with the schema that the Air Force and the Army are the same branch, and respects the status of a higher ranked officer.

Tony is at the same time very thoughtful and caring with his giving, and also totally clueless about giving to Pepper. This is why she used to buy her own presents, but he's still feeling out the romantic side of things and buying gifts is traditionally a thing you do for loved ones.

A trophy gun (a pistolet is a type of handgun) is one taken off a dead enemy. Some people find the custom distasteful, but others see it as practical. In the middle of a campaign it would be hard to shop for gifts for each other, so I choose to believe that between stuff from care packages, things they might pick up in liberated towns, and yes, trophy weapons, the Howlies cobbled together thoughtful gifts. Howard liked throwing money around though, and wanted to prank Peggy.

Knitting needles are terrifying.

Adapting your behavior willingly to fit another person's preferences, or to help them feel better, is a good sign of trust and teamwork. Clint describes choice-mimicking, a common sign of healthy co-adaptation to a partnership. Had they done any of these things because the other told them to, it would be unhealthy. Picking up phrases, foods, or even clothing styles from a friend is normal. Now, most people would not make themselves bright purple high-durability leather armor because their friend was being teased, but nobody ever called Clint "most people" either.

Bucky is taking Maya's observations on what makes a marriage to heart. For most of the Avengers, a wedding does not a marriage make and the Trio and Nat/Clint are already married, sans wedding.

Grapefruit spoons are also terrifying. Google images of them if you don't know what they are. *Shudders*

Teaser:

"I love you Pepper. Wanna go kill bad guys with me?"
“We already are,” she pointed out.
“I meant forever, you and me and these weirdos who adopted themselves into our family. Pepper Potts, will you make me the happiest superhero on the planet and agree…

TBC (Yes, I'm evil, you knew that already.)
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Darcy witnesses trust exercises, and an unusual proposal.

Steve witnesses a new form of 'normal is a dryer setting' and has a merry Christmas.

Bucky cleans up with new friends, while defending the old.

Chapter Notes


Extra thanks to ValkyriePhoenix for introducing Clan MacBain and their amazing oddness to the sandbox, and to Maharet for linguistic help on Gaelic and the subtle difference in good faith vs goodwill.

Some lines directly stolen from their places in canon and repositioned, because I thought they worked here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy was grateful for the assists Jarvis was lending with the Iron Legion. That didn’t mean she liked it when a suit went buzzing by her at top speeds, or watching Tony drop off ledges with only the trust Jarvis would catch him. She knew their digital team-mate would never let Tony be hurt if he could help it, but still, it was nerve wracking. She could get where Steve came from on the Play-Dangling. At least the battle against the Extremis soldiers was winding down and only Aldritch Killian and a few obviously higher rank hench-people were giving them that much fight.

She’d just vaulted up to a bit of scaffolding to stay away from a particularly nasty piece of work that reminded her unpleasantly of Schmidt when Tony screamed. She saw why in a moment and thrust a hand out to snag Pepper’s arm. They were tucked in close to each other, so it was no surprise that both of them heard Killian’s creepy boasting over the com.

“You really didn’t deserve her, Tony. It's a pity. I was so close to having her... perfect.”

“That’s seriously what he calls it?” Darcy asked Pepper as the other woman wrinkled her nose. “Damn, you were right when you told us he’s a creeper.”

“OK, OK,” Tony said in a panicking rush. “Just wait, wait, slow down, slow down! You're right... I don't deserve her. I never did and I spend every day trying to. But here's where you're wrong: she was already perfect.”

Pepper beamed and Darcy helped her vault back up onto the platform. She joined them moments
later and ended up just standing by Tony as Pepper batted Killian around like a cat with a catnip mouse. It was pretty amazing and she loved the look on Tony’s face as Pepper kicked Killian off the platform.

“You said you didn’t do sentimental,” Pepper accused as she turned. “We’re coming back to that.”

“It’s not sentimentality if it’s factually true. I love you Pepper. Wanna go kill bad guys with me?”

“We already are,” she pointed out.

“I meant forever, you and me and these weirdos who adopted themselves into our family. Pepper Potts, will you make me the happiest superhero on the planet and agree… to be an Avenger?”

“Of course, Tony. Let’s start with this loser.” She turned and used a vaulting move Darcy knew she had to have learned from Nat to land feet first on an Extremis soldier’s neck with a cracking sound.

“You’re totally squeeing like a schoolgirl inside, aren’t you?” Darcy asked the billionaire beside her.

“Wouldn’t you, if that woman agreed to make you hers?”

“Point, let’s go, the outer edges seem to be mopping up and I think I saw Rhodey am-scray the President earlier. Final boss battle time.”

Steve was happy to have Natasha appear at his back as they picked soldiers off to buy some escape time for Colonel Rhodes and President Obama. He was happier to hear Tony finally ask Pepper to seal the deal and join the team and to hear her say yes. In fact, wanting to congratulate them was his main reason to move in towards their last known position on the tanker.

“Strategic retreat?” Nat asked him as they broke and run while the last batch tried to get back up.

“Nope, happy for Pepper and Tony, that’s all.”

“Ah. Do you think she likes cake? I feel this might be a celebration where cake becomes a thing to provide. I hope my bakery will do a Congratulations on Becoming a Superhero cake. I don't like finding new places to get things.”

Steve shrugged as he dropped down a level to trot up to Darcy as Killian was ranting about how he was the Mandarin.

“We knew that already!” he yelled, channeling seventy missed years of berating umpires into it.

Suddenly the night was broken by a loud, long howl. A few basso growls and a couple cat screams joined the answering call.

“What the hell was that?” Killian asked. Pepper shrugged elegantly and looked at Darcy.

“Back up. Jarvis, please don’t target the newcomers,” she said into her com with a serenity that bordered on insane in that place and time.

“Well, if they don’t take out the walking Darwin Award, I’m ok with that,” Pepper acknowledged. What looked for a moment like a large red wolf leapt to Darcy’s side, although when he straightened, Steve could see it was a man. A very hairy, very angry man, who vaguely reminded him of Howlett when the Canadian had gotten riled.
“MacBain, I assume,” he said conversationally. “Darcy said you might drop by. I hear you’ll be looking for new employment later, have you considered SHIELD? They do have a hokey name, and pest control issues, but the dental plan is great and we could use more people we trust there.”

“What the hell is happening right now!” screeched Killian.

“Well, it’s past midnight, so… Tuesday,” Pepper answered, looking at her watch before glancing up. “Oh Aldritch,” she said pityingly, “this is the Avengers, normal isn’t what we do.”

“You aren’t an Avenger.”

“Eeeenh,” Tony made an annoying buzzer sound. “She is now. My vote is we let Pepper decide how to use her amazingly awesome fire powers, that so far have not caused her to explode, to handle him.”

“Seconded,” Darcy and Nat said immediately.

“Ladies first,” Steve said with a small smirk at Killian. “You two can split what’s left-over.”

“Guys,” Clint said on the coms, “we have oh-eight-fours literally everywhere, please advise. And pass my congrats to the happy couple, but mostly advise.”

“Fire bad, fur good,” Steve said then looked at the shocked MacBain. “Assuming you didn’t bring anyone who was on fire?” he clarified, waving at Killian who was glowing much more now.

“Nay, I didna. Yer na what I expected.”

“Darcy has me well trained, but even if she didn’t, Ma was Irish. I know not to ask, as long as you’re helping out. You are helping out, right?”

“Aye. Yer lass is my chance ta get me brother back. For Barra, ge b’e air bith a bheir e. Ye ken?”

“Yeah, I can see that. I don’t speak Gaelic, but I knew a guy once, he taught me a phrase. It’s either a sign of friendship or a fantastically dirty joke, you can’t tell with Mad Jack and nobody would confirm or deny it. Aon airson na h-uide agus gach aon airson?”

The man broke out laughing. “Aye, ye knew a Scotsman,” he said without telling Steve what it meant. “My clan’s taking care of the rest, so what now?”

“Up to Pepper, it’s her he messed with,” Steve said, nodding at her.

“Maybe I should let him live with his failure,” she mused, turning her back on Killian. Before he could warn her, the man leapt at her back and she swung a powered-up hand with a repulsor gauntlet into a flat handed upper cut to his chin, blasting his head, the rest of the body limply following, into a wall twenty feet away. “Oh my god... that was really violent...”

“True,” Tony admitted slowly. “But you look great like this, the repulsor and the sports bra...”

“I think I understand why you don’t want to give up the suits. Am I going to be okay?”

“No. You’re in a relationship with me, nothing will ever be okay. But I had this twenty years ago when I was drunk, I can sort it out. I fix stuff. I’m the mechanic, it’s what I do.”

“And besides, Maya’s going to be all over helping you,” Bucky pointed out from beside Steve. “If only to prevent Tony from cracking jokes about hot sex. You can’t deny that’s a pun you’d be all over,” he accused the agreeing man.
“Really, Pepper,” Nat chided, “you’re our family, we won’t let this hurt you. Have a little faith, and I say this as a Russian and an assassin.”

And the burning oil rig was merrily crackling, the screams were fading out, and Steve smiled.

“Merry Christmas, Avengers.”

<^>

Clean up was always a bitch and a half, Bucky knew this, that was why he volunteered to stay and help with the physical labor of saving the tanker before the flaming cargo ended up in the bay. The MacBains stayed with him, hauling material and swiftly delivering specialized fire extinguishers to the right places. SHIELD dropped by once or twice, mostly with materials and didn’t ask questions. That may have had to do with how Roy and Cailean looked at them with hard stares and a bit too much tooth in their smiles. He wasn’t picky.

“So, Darcy, what’s she like?” Cailean asked him at one point as he lifted a beam for the woman to grab a body from under.

“Sass, class and balls of brass,” he replied instantly. “She’s been saving me and mine forever. I love her.” He shrugged not knowing what else to say. “She’s the kind of dame who will risk her life and soul to spare someone she cares about pain, and then rip them a new one for being an idiot in the same breath. Don’t know how else to put it.”

Cailean nodded. “D’ye think she’ll accept what we did as payment? We didn’t take the main kill.”

“Don’t know what you’re paying for, so I don’t know,” Bucky said honestly. “But she never wanted you to kill that moron, we knew it was either going to be Pepper or Tony in the end, with the smart money on Pepper. You showed up, if Darcy agreed to anything in exchange for help, she’ll count it. She’s big on being where you need to be and doing what you need to do. It’s her thing.”

“We showed willing…. Aye, I can see it. Roy’s worried sick, though.”

“If you take the body over to remains disposal and ask them to check the dental for identification, I’ll see what I can do. Sergeant to Sergeant, you know?”

Cailean nodded and Bucky went to help Roy.

“heard you’re worried about whatever deal you made with my girl,” he started noncommittally. “She does honor bargains, you know. She can be a bit slim on the hows and the whys and doing exactly what people want if she doesn’t think it’s what they need, but if she says she’ll do a thing, the thing is done. In a way, letter of the law at least, if the spirit isn’t what she thinks is best for you.”

“I’ve no quarrel with her fairness,” Roy said quickly. “I just don’t know if we did enough to hold our end.”

“You realize when she found out ‘MacBain will help’ she thought it was one guy, right? If your people would follow you this far, do this much, it means something. Those of us who lead see that. I was never the commanding officer, but I was an officer, and I see it.”

“Aye, but what we asked in return is… large.”

“Say you had a cousin and a friend and a comrade in arms who was held prisoner, attacked, tortured, experimented on, and I said I’d come ‘round to help out. Then you get to the final fight, and every Avenger including Thor and Loki shows up to kick asses so you can focus. How giving would you
feel?"

“I’d be a wee bit disturbed you knew how ta contact the great mage Loki, but saying I was feeling giving would be to understate it.” He paused, a hand going through thick red hair that reminded Bucky of someone. “I think I see now. Yer lass values Stark and his fiery bride as I would my kin. We showed our good faith by coming out in numbers.”

Bucky tilted his head. He was better at the subtle shifts in language than Steve was, even Darcy was specialized out of need. Neither had spent much time with dock hands from all over to learn the ways things could be different without sounding like it.

“No, you showed goodwill. Darcy won’t make you bow to anything. But you are now classed, in her words, as ‘good people’. That’s a quote, when she took off to get some sleep like she desperately needed, she told me ‘take care of MacBain, will you, he’s good people’. It’s hard to get that classification from her.”

Roy paused again in thought. There was something in the way his head angled that called up another memory. Bucky was used to grabbing memories where he could, even with the jumpstart from Darcy’s download he needed to.

“How d’ye know Ciara?” Roy asked, suddenly a bit more hostile.

“I’m going to say that’s a yes. If it helps any, my best girl’s brother is tutoring the boys, my daughter is their honorary Aunt, and the last time I actually fell for a loop-trap it was the Harrow Twins playing with Christmas lights. That… was embarrassing. But higher level agents than I have had worse happen during a Code Chartreuse.”

“Oh, yeah, the bairns are MacBain blood alright. Barra’s going to be thrilled. Then horrified, then thrilled again, until he makes up his bloody mind.”

“He can be whatever he wants as long as he knows the mother has the best assassins in the world on speed dial and the boys have called literal Norse deities for piggy back rides.”

“Subtle, you aren’t.”

“The one thing the asshole who caused this mess got right, ever since ‘the big dude with a hammer’ fell out of the sky, subtlety’s kinda had its day. That big dude being my brother in law. Sort of. So watch it around people I like.”

“Will do.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Am-scray- pig latin for Scram, as in to get away.
Oh-eight-fours- 084 is the number code for "this is weird shit and we don't know what it means" in SHIELD.
Ge b'e air bith a bheir e- whatever it takes.
Ken- in this case meaning 'know' and not the mans name.
Aon airson na h-uile agus gach aon airson- all for one and one for all.
Rip them a new one- verbally lay into someone, really harsh reprimanding
Slim- following the exact promise without fulfilling the expected promise.

Notes:
Doing a trust exercise and watching a trust exercise are two very different tests if trust, as Darcy is now learning. She can trust pretty easily (for her understandable issues) if her body is at risk, but she gets nervous trusting the safety of others to someone else.

Final boss battles are a staple of video games, and much of the super hero crap Darcy has had to deal with is laid out in much the same way. A bunch of minor fights that give you what you need to fight the Big Bad, then the climactic battle at the end. That's a side effect of movie plot lay outs, but in canon, Darcy just sees it as how you fight super-villains.

The Avengers are treating Tony's proposal the way ordinary people would think of treating a marriage proposal, because to them, this is as big a commitment step as getting married. Every one of them on the tanker already feels married to their partner(s) minus the wedding anyhow, and a Stark wedding would be a circus and not the fun dare Clint to do trapeze kind.

Yelling at the umpire about the idiocy of a call is a respected American Baseball Tradition. Not sure why, but to my knowledge it has always been one.

Darwin Awards are given posthumously to people who did us the service of removing themselves from the gene pool with their stupidity. Killian is a Darwin Award recipient too dumb to know he was dead the moment he touched Happy.

The MacBain shifter gift is better detailed in Harrowing, the related work by ValkyriePhoenix, any inconsistency in description please chalk up to Steve having a tiny smidgen of Reality Sight and is seeing truths others don't. As always, she made the clan canon and I made the characters of Roy and Cailean. (Pronounced Kah-len for those who care.)

In 2012, when this is set, Christmas day was a Tuesday, and that was also the day the Battle of the Norco happened.

The Irish people I have known will all deny any rumor of superstition or 'old beliefs' but also would not step in a fairy ring if you put a gun to their heads. I'm assuming Steve and Sarah Rogers were that same way, they know not to look a gift fay creature in the mouth unless it's about to bite you. Or make a deal.

Scots have an odd sense of humor when dealing with non Scots. This is right up that alley.

Roy has no official rank in the military that VP and I have discussed, but he is the second in command to Barra MacBain, and that's what Bucky picks up on as "Sergeant" with regards to Roy. He acts like a highly regarded non-com officer, as Bucky was with the Howlies. This is also what Bucky relates to with people following Roy.

Roy, not knowing of the proposal is guessing Pepper and Stark are engaged based on everyone else's reactions.
Good faith, in Gaelic, which is Roy's first language, conveys a level of subservience. He's been thinking in that way because he is unused to getting anything from outsiders without bending and bowing and taking a lower place. Goodwill implies equality, which is how Bucky sees the interaction and knows Darcy would as well, were she made aware of the layers.

An individual being "good people" is (at least in Missouri where I placed Darcy's background) a very special qualifier that is not handed out lightly, indicating faith in the basic human decency of that individual regardless of past action or expectation of others. Example: I know you hear bad things about people with pit bulls, and he does have an arrest record, but we should let him join Bikers Against Child Abuse. He's good people.

Roy is, as a reminder, the Harrow Twins uncle on their father's side. That's what is being connected, but Bucky won't bring the kids up first. He brings up Ciara with a side mention of the kids to get a reaction and gauge how Roy is related.

Teaser:

“I know that, you know that, and a goodly chunk of my listed victims know that, but the general public does not, will not and should not know that. It would mean exposing you, and your relatives with the gift.”
Chapter Summary

Darcy goes home to see her parents and introduce them to her men, and winds up telling them everything.

Steve tries to impress Darcy's mom, fails, tries to intimidate her, and succeeds in impressing her.

Bucky is thoroughly freaked out by nice people who aren't as weird as he is and meets a nasty neighbor.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To halfelf87, quadrad, Shadows_of_Shemai, ValkyriePhoenix, Notashamed, Joey99, hafizatulsufiadaysacob, Darylslover33, sara47q, SionnachOiche3, Maedae84, tigrislilium, Selene_Aduial and the 5 new kudo-ers.

Settling into the new year was… not as physically hard as becoming an Avenger had been for Darcy, but something else all together emotionally. For one, having missed the holidays entirely, she was gently berated into coming home to see her family. For another, Steve and Bucky refused to let her go alone, despite the fact only her Mom’s side would get how they really met. She got them to agree to telling her family they met in New York, which was true, in a way, and that Thor had adopted her in an event she had to sign a giant stack of NDA’s over, which was also true. Thankfully her family had all met Jane and seen the tiny scientist go stumbling into a topic she suddenly had to stop talking about, so they would believe that.

It didn’t make going home easier.

“Are you sure I have to do this?” she asked the boys as they straightened their ties.

“I want your parents to like me, Darcy,” Steve said earnestly, and his big innocent eyes really ought to be classed as a super power.

“I want them to not be terrified of me,” Bucky said honestly, adjusting the glove on his left hand. “Hard to have that happen if the first they hear of me is that I was too busy being a Soviet and or Squid Nazi assassin to let people know rumors of my demise were greatly exaggerated.”

“You were brainwashed and held against your will, you had no bodily autonomy. It wasn’t your fault. Actually, I was driving your body for a good half of the shit you supposedly did, so if anybody is to blame here, it’s me. And yes,” she said, sticking a hand up, “I know it wasn’t my fault. I was showing you how not your fault it was. We agree everyone hates Nazis and move on.”

“I know that, you know that, a goodly chunk of my listed victims know that, but the general public
does not, will not and should not know that. It would mean exposing you, and your relatives with the gift. I’m not risking that. We’ll do that the hard way, but before then I want your family on my side. I don’t want anybody in your family feeling torn about our relationship beyond whatever they may feel about two fellas and a dame all stepping out together.”

Darcy sighed. “At least Tony swung for a chauffeur, the RV is not something I want to show up in. How do I look?” She patted her hair, for once not jammed under a hat or in a firmly controlled braid or bun.

“You look amazing Doll,” Bucky said, pulling her hands down. “Stevie, tell her she looks gorgeous.”

“I’ve seen famous French art not half as pretty. Is it silly I’m glad you chose a dress?”

“No, you’ve liked me in dresses since high school.” Darcy sighed again. She was doing that a lot, she needed to cool it, but she couldn’t help it. At least she knew for a fact the classy burgundy hourglass dress looked fine. Pepper and Natasha had conspired together to get it made for her, and the tiny, ancient, Russian ball-buster Nat called a seamstress had made sure she knew it fit properly.

“Doll, this isn’t like you,” Bucky said, kissing her knuckles lightly. “Where’d the woman who tased Thor go?”

“Oh, she’s here, and she can still tase you.” Darcy shook her head. “But she can’t exactly tase her Dad. Fighting is easy, family isn’t.”

“That never stopped you before.”

“Point. Let’s get this going.”

Steve was nervous, although he’d never tell Darcy that when she was already stressed. He knew she’d be torn between trying to tell him it was fine and using it as an escape tool. Fortunately, he had enough experience with Darcy’s family due to swaps to fake confidence. They had no idea what he had first looked like, he reminded himself, and if they did, in this century it wouldn’t be something they could use to argue Darcy’s choices. Nobody would get away with telling Darcy she needed to find a man who could support her in the proper fashion. She’d probably laugh in their face and go on a tear about the economic structure similarity of Steve’s formative years and now.

Of course, that didn’t touch the worry about being a trio. He loved both of them, needed both of them, wanted to keep them safe and happy. But he wasn’t going to get far with that if he didn’t gather his courage and face her family.

Walking up to the door on Darcy’s left so Bucky could hide his left arm at her back, Steve pulled on his dancing monkey smile and braced. Not well enough though, as Darcy elbowed him as her mother opened the door. He was leveling narrowed eyes at Darcy when he registered Elizabeth Lewis staring at them.

“Uh… Mrs. Lewis. I uh, we brought flowers.” Oh, God have mercy on him, he was no better now than he had been when he was young and dumb. Thankfully, Bucky was quick on the draw and handed the carefully chosen potted African violet over with a soft “ma’am” and his heart melting aw shucks grin.

“Darcy… Why do you have no longer dead war heroes with you?”
“Uh, Mom, funny thing… Steve, Bucky, meet my Mom, Mom, meet my Swaps.”

“Swaps, plural?” was all her mother said, and Steve now knew where Darcy got the scary from.

“Steve, you said that in the out loud voice,” Bucky informed him gently.

“I’m so sorry,” he stammered, feeling the warmth at his cheeks turning him red.

“Yeah, so these crazy people are mine now,” Darcy continued. “One, I want them that way, and two, the swap bonds are still there. I used Steve’s eyes the other day to check the timer on the oven because I was too lazy to go in there and deal with Clint and Bruce shooing me away from the cooking. They get territorial.”

“And you were reading a… rifle magazine? You don’t use rifles.”

“Ah, that was me,” Bucky clarified. “I wanted to know what stuff cost on market before I told Tony any custom specs. You know Starks, they say they’re made of iron, but act like they’re made of cash. Makes me itch.”

“I think you need to come inside,” Elizabeth Lewis said, stepping back to let them into a nice warm entryway with pictures on the wall of Darcy and her family. Steve smiled, it hadn’t changed much. “If anyone asks, they’re male models and we support your life choices.”

“Um, you do, though, right?” Darcy asked as she slipped her low heels off and guided Bucky to a bench to get the tied dress shoes he’d insisted on off. Steve just toed off his loafers. He brushed a hand gently against her arm, sharing comfort silently. “Even if my life choices were… a bit strange, you’d support them. Right?”

“Unless you’ve taken to hurting children or started talking in theaters. We don’t want you going to the special hell, after all.” Darcy laughed at her mother’s Firefly reference. Then she pulled up short.

“Hey, stop that,” Steve ordered, pulling her into his arms. “Your kids turned out fine, mostly. I worry about Maya’s lack of scientific boundaries, but I’m pretty sure that’s not on you. You and Buck did what you could with those girls and one’s a superhero now.” Darcy nodded into his shoulder. “Bucky was in… not a good situation, and your daughter helped him, Mrs. Lewis. What the two had to do to survive, and keep as many other people as they could alive, isn’t their fault.” He was ready to stare her down but she turned to Bucky.

“You and my baby raised kids?”

“Twenty-eight girls, but we wound up getting disowned by one. Lena’s not real good with people.”

“By which you mean she went banana balls 'kill people for fun' insane,” Darcy said, squeezing free. “Can’t blame her, that place was designed to break us. Statistically, we’ll be lucky if she’s our worst.”

“Darcy Neora Lewis, why didn’t you bring your children to visit me? You know I want grandkids!”

“I’ll just call Natasha and Maya then, yeah?” Darcy said. “Let me hit the bathroom, okay.”

“The bathroom?” Mrs. Lewis asked.

“Darcy wants to turn on the bug zapper and it hurts our ears,” Steve explained. “Being a spy left her with trust issues.”
“Eh, I still can’t stand to watch wrestling unless I can critique the form in Greek. We all get quirks. What do you two want to drink?”

“Hot chocolate?” he asked hopefully. “Buck, you’ve got to try the hot chocolate, back when Darcy was in college one of the only things that got me through her first roommate’s existence was the hot chocolate mix from Darcy’s Mom.”

“It’s Swiss Miss and some spices,” Mrs. Lewis said. “But sure, one of the national heroes dating my daughter wants cocoa, he gets cocoa. You want it too, sweetie?” she asked Bucky, who just nodded.

“Good, make yourselves at home. Paul gets home in half an hour, try not to get spooked by the green pick-up truck.”

“Buck?”

“Yeah?”

“Are we in heaven?”

“Well, we did die, Punk. Don’t ask questions.”

<> Bucky was honestly more than a little intimidated by Darcy’s mother, but her Dad was who drove home the strangeness. Apparently he was a history teacher who had met Liz (which she wanted to be called) as a freshman in college and been spurred to get a further degree by her angry mutters about inaccurate textbooks. Which meant he was well versed in what had been written about the two of them. Steve didn’t seem bothered at all.

“Why isn’t this as hard for you as it is for me?” he hissed lowly at Steve when Paul was turned to answer a question from the kitchen.

“I already hit the shock of you being in a history book, remember, I just didn’t recognize me. Not that weird, I spent two months in the USO re-learning how to walk. You adjust.”

“Really?” Paul asked. “I always wondered, the before and after photos, were they doctored at all to make the change larger?”

“No sir, not to my knowledge. I was your daughter’s height, skinny as a rail, and living with something like seventeen disorders. I was pretty lucky our side’s eugenics fanatics didn’t get me.”

“God, Steve don’t even say that!” Bucky snapped at his longest held love.

“Oh, right, Jewish family. Sorry sir.”

Bucky groaned. “I meant, please do not remind me how close I came to losing you before you ever stepped foot in Europe. I’m pretty sure Paul knows we had people who were horrible, because as you said, Jewish family. People were awful, and I think he got that memo.”

“There will always be awful people, James,” Paul said kindly. “It’s up to the not awful ones to stand up to them, and to encourage others to do the same. Evil triumphs when good men do nothing.”

“You sound like you’ve been listening to Steve longer than you could have been,” Bucky said suspiciously. He couldn’t help it; his default setting was distrust. Paul laughed.
“Your man’s not the only one who taught good morals, you know.” Bucky blushed and the doorbell rang.

“It’s the girls!” Darcy called. “Bucky honey, can you get it?”

Bucky smiled at how easy this had turned out for Darcy, he was really looking forward to getting Nat and Maya in on this normal family thing. It was weird as all hell, but it was fun. Until he opened the door to a sour faced woman who immediately started in on him about… he had no idea, actually.

“Darcy, it’s not the kids,” he called back lightly. “Ma’am, I don’t know you, I don’t know what your issues are with anyone here, but I need you to calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” she shrieked and Bucky had to give himself a mental corrective headslap on that one. Telling people to be calm almost never made them calm.

“Ma’am, I am a service veteran and my issues are so bad they’re classified. If you won’t calm down, I will take steps to keep everyone safe. Goodbye.” He closed the door and slumped onto the bench shaking as Darcy came and carefully set her hands in the right places to disable him if he got violent.

“Don’t mind Belinda, she’s made of spite and improperly constructed moral outrage,” Liz said, flipping on the sprinkler system until the shrieks faded. “Darcy, why are you preparing to dislocate James’ arm?”

“Oh, don’t worry, this one’s a replacement and Tony is working on a better Stark Tech option because Squids can’t design for crap,” Darcy said and Bucky tugged off the glove to wave metal fingers.

“We don’t really trust it,” he continued for her. “It’s sort of my worst weapon, and one time coming to and finding out brainwashed me tried to strangle Dollface was more than enough.”

“What?”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot, Bucky was brainwashed, because Nazis suck. He’s better now and doesn’t have recurring conditioning slips often, but he worries.”

“Forgot? Really, Doll? You forgot to tell them that.”

“I was stressed about coming out as polyamorous, okay? I didn’t think to warn them about the Squid Nazi thing, or the underground resistance thing, or the Cold War assassin thing, or the super heroine thing. Sorry. So, Mom, Dad, I’m the Lieu, yes that one, and yes that other one too. I didn’t pick the name, before you ask. Dugan did, six kinds of crazy as he is.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
NDA- non-disclosure agreement, a legal prevention on talking about certain things.
Stepping out together- dating in a serious way.
Go on a tear- rant.
Specs- details in a machine.
Eugenics- called the science of gene cleaners, the bad science behind the concept of race
Notes:
"Rumors of my demise have been greatly exaggerated." was a statement made by Mark Twain after his obituary was mistakenly published.

While Darcy saved Bucky from a great deal of the stuff he'd have to face charges for, Bucky doesn't want her or her family to be studied because he used her as an alibi.

Darcy's dress looks like this dress.

Darcy can totally tase gods and still be a wreck about parental approval. I will not give up that headcanon.

Potted African violets are a good gift if you know the person likes gardening.

Some homes in America have a no-shoes policy, as the Lewis house does.

Hurting children and talking in theaters are the reasons listed by Shepard Book in Firefly to get sent to the "special Hell" and that has become another Browncoat reference.

Liz Lewis had a Swap with Plato as a teen. Plato was an Olympic wrestling champion as well as a philosopher.

Swiss Miss is a cheap brand of instant hot chocolate. Adding a dash of cinnamon and nutmeg can really bring instant cocoa mix into a new level.

Steve shows himself as poorly coordinated in the chase scene, and I put that to not knowing where his feet were.

Paul is referencing Edmund Burke, who wrote “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

That one annoying neighbor is something we mostly deal with easily, but Bucky is seeing it bigger than it would appear because he's being stressed and has PTSD. Removing himself from the situation was necessary as he could not end the situation. As Bucky's PTSD came mostly from moral injury, being made to cross lines he didn't want to, he fears his own reaction most, and Darcy is here reassuring him that he can't hurt the people he cares for. The threat of incapacitation is being used to calm him, not hurt him, no matter how it looks.

Darcy knows her parents would know of the Lieu as a shadowy figure in Howlies history because they are into that sort of thing, and the Lieu who is an Avenger, because of news.

Teaser:

“Didn’t he try to invade the planet?” Uncle Joe asked. “That’s an odd and self-
destructive hobby, maybe we should host an intervention.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Darcy greets more family, and finds out her birth one rolls with the crazy better than expected.

Steve moderates a dinner discussion that could have gone much, much worse.

Bucky gets a call and flies home to take care of an old enemy and new allies.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To ValkyriePhoenix, halfelf87, Snowecat, Maedae84, quadrad, Joey99, sara47q, Shadows_of_Shemai, aquadrop25, ktravierso, tigrisilium, Beth_Mac, SionnachOiche3, Notashamed, rosiedeplume, phoenix_173, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, Selene_Aduial, kikistimi, Matilda_Nicki and the 9 new kudo-ers.

Edits have been made due to discovery that what I thought was Gaelic was actually a very specific regional slang. My thanks to Maharet for catching that for me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“And so, now we have Bucky back, my people are preparing to yank any and all rugs out from under the new and not really improved Hydra, and my kids just texted that they’re in the driveway,” Darcy finished, moving to open the front door.

“I’m honestly still stuck on ‘he got better’ as an excuse for how he broke brainwashing,” her Dad said.

"It worked for the guy who got turned into a newt," she heard Steve defend.

“Nat, Maya, come in!” she said to her girls, ignoring him. Storing vital memories and the chair and well, all of it, was a can of worms she didn’t really want to open for her Dad yet. “Meet your Nana Liz, devochki.”

“All Mamma,” Nat said with a hint, tiny though it was, of shyness. Darcy smiled at her and kissed her cheek as she kicked off shoes and moved to greet her Nana Liz.

“Hey Mom,” Maya greeted much more easily. For all Darcy had worried about sending her away so young, it had resulted in Maya not being as emotionally reserved as Natasha. As Natka and Vikitsa it had been the reverse.

“Do I get cheek kisses too?” Clint asked.

“Only if you sit down and take your boots off Clint. Oh, Aunt Leora, hi let me get that bag for you.”

“I’ve got it,” Nat said and whisked the insulated bag that, with any luck, held home-made food fit for
gods, and Darcy was in a good place to make that assessment, Thor's pop-tart fondness aside.

“Thank you, Natasha. Such a good granddaughter,” Darcy heard her Mom say.

“Uh…”

“Oh don’t be silly, sweetie,” Aunt Leora chided. “Your Uncle Joseph and I were told about the thing where you might have to be a cosmic mensch someday. We were the ones who would have gotten you if anything had happened to your parents. Now, let me look at my niece’s daughters. With that hair I could easily get Natasha a date with the Feinstein’s boy.”

“No, no hooking my baby up,” Darcy warned. “That’s my job and I did a good one. That’s Clint, also called Hawkeye, he’s an Avenger, gets a decent salary from SHIELD, and makes very good cookies. He’s Natasha’s. You can help me find a nice girl for Maya, and maybe look into things for any of the others we find,” she eased up.

“I don’t want anything serious,” Maya said. “I’m still recovering from the unfairness that I live down the hall from THE Doctor Ross and she’s straight as a ruler.”

“And dating a guy who can become a two-ton, super powered hero with tantrum problems,” Darcy added.

“Bruce is negotiable and I like Hulk, he’s a cute kid, but it’s moot as Betty isn’t into women. Why are the pretty and smart ones always straight?”

“Mine aren’t,” Darcy added a little smugly.

“Yours signed up for untested human enhancement, and risked both your lives on a bunch of emotionally damaged four-year-old kids, respectively. Are you sure you stand by the ‘smart’ comment?”

“Oi! I’m standing right here, young lady!” Bucky snapped with no heat.

“I’m going to take Miss Leora here back to the kitchen,” Clint said. “You guys need to learn to modulate the weird or you’ll break the sane people. Come on, I brought what I need to make rugelach, baking is very relaxing as a coping strategy.”

“Is it sad that Barton is a better adult than any of us?” Maya asked her.

“No,” Darcy said carefully. “He put effort and study into the art of acting moderately normal and well adjusted for his niece and nephew. We just wing it. It’s like how Tony can’t draw and Steve can, but Steve gets lost with coding. There’s practice involved.”

“Oh. That makes me feel better. Thanks Mom.”

“Sure thing, sweetie.”

<^>

Steve liked Darcy’s family. They had to do a few rounds of ‘he got better’ when explaining Bucky’s situation, because it was very complex and Clint was protective of civilian sanity, but they survived it.

Uncle Joe had cracked up laughing when he saw Steve and said something about a book to Darcy, who blushed. He wasn’t a bad guy though, when Steve got to know him. It was a bit
overwhelming how much family he suddenly had, not because you bond with those who fight beside you, but by totally normal means. The Lewis clan had summarily adopted him with a speed that made him think Darcy was the reserved one in the bunch. Which was saying something considering…

“Angel, have you told them about your brothers?”

“When did I get sons?” Liz asked, blinking.


“Didn’t he try to invade the planet?” Uncle Joe asked. “That’s an odd and self-destructive hobby, maybe we should host an intervention.”

“That would be hard, he went back to Asgard, but if I don’t get a letter by the end of this year, I’m asking Jane to rig me a break-and-enter device for the Bifrost. I don’t trust his dad. Besides, he’s scary smart and way good with the magic so had he actually tried to invade, we’d be conquered. There was a body autonomy issue, but thankfully a good enough hit with a taser knocked it loose and he could ask for help in not invading for reals. He had to *look* like he was invading though, because the person who controlled him was watching.”

“Hate the Mad Hatter,” Clint grumbled and Nat tweaked his ear.

“No moping. Wait, watch, plan, and when you can actually get something *done* on that front, strike before he can dodge.”

“Yes Nat.”

“Autonomy is a touchy subject for us all,” Steve explained gently. “But I like Loki, he doesn’t care at all about Captain America, he just cares that *Steve Rogers* is worthy of the woman he calls sister. That’s really nice for me. I know the dancing monkey outfit is important to people, but sometimes I just want to be plain old Steve again. Minus the horrible health stuff.”

“I think that’s perfectly normal to want,” Uncle Joe said. “Being seen for you, not what you’ve been made. Validating inner self is important.”

“No work at dinner,” Darcy said automatically. “If Steve wants a therapist, we will find him one not related to him, okay?”

“You’re a shrink?” Clint asked with slight horror.

“I see you met a bad one,” came the immediate response.

“Actually, SHIELD psychiatric is highly competent, at least, for their area of expertise,” Natasha said grudgingly. “We just don’t fall into it. The DSM has nothing for alien mind control artifacts or being raised to kill people. Moral injury is a specialty thing, and the Avengers have enough trust issues that opening up to a specialist is too difficult. That’s why we adapted our own methods. Clint bakes, Steve draws, Papa and I do ballet, Mama mothers us all, Tony builds things, Bruce meditates, and Pepper is learning Krav Maga. We also have non-combatants who bully us into talking. I like Bucky’s sister Skye. She makes things… clean.”

Steve thought of the way Skye always talked like people’s minds were very complex computers, and the sterile banks of servers in the Tower. He could see how it would be cleaner for Natasha than the
messy emotional side of things. She wanted to feel the way people did, and understand them in ways she hadn’t been allowed to, but it was hard for her to get there.

“Skye is good at that. I like Jemma, we use math, it works for me. I like that you can solve things and sort data with it. There is a lot more data to sort now. The internet is great, but big.”

“Personally, I like Phil, he already knew my history and I don’t worry he’ll get upset if I talk about Dad or Barney,” Clint added. “But talking to Bucky and Loki was also… I don’t like being alone.”

“Nobody does,” Aunt Leora said before firmly changing the topic to something happier in a pointed way.

Everything was fine until Bucky’s phone rang.

<Bucky was finally relaxing as he picked dishes up to help clean up after dinner. Because his life was one big morbid joke, his phone rang and he answered to hear Jarvis.

“Code Chartreuse was called at SHIELD HQ, and the Harrow twins have boarded a quinjet and set the auto-pilot for the Tower. Agents Barton and Romanova have their phones turned off, and you are the last Avenger with clearance to handle them.”

“What.”

“We are about to receive guests that historically require specialist supervision. Please return. Please? Last time they were here unsupervised I had to patch ten holes in security that should not have mattered because why would anyone take marbles into the vent system? I don’t want to be alone when they get here.”

“Jarvis… are you scared of the Harrow boys?”

“…yes. But I’m more scared of what could scare them enough they ran away from SHIELD, given what we know of that organization.”

“We’re on it.” He hung up on the distressed AI and stuck his head into the living room. “Guys, we need to scramble, a Code Chartreuse is headed for the Tower in a hijacked plane.”

“But the boys are too little to reach all the flight gear!” Darcy exclaimed.

“I… uh, that’s on me,” Clint said. “I gave them auto-pilot lessons in case of emergency. But as mischief prone as they are, they do know not to use it irresponsibly.”

“Where’s Ciara?” asked Steve.

“Mission, Eye only,” Nat said, standing. “It was lovely meeting Mama’s family, and the food was delicious, Nana Liz, but we have to go rescue a friend’s four-year-old twins.”

“But, you’re not leaving yet, are you?” Aunt Leora said plaintively. “I wanted to know more about Darcy’s family. I’m still not totally satisfied with ‘he got better’ as an explanation. James is a very nice young man, I want to know he’s taken care of.”

“You can talk on the phone or something, Aunt Leora,” Darcy said firmly. “We need to get to New York, where’s the quinjet parked? I hope you didn’t land too far off, Tony’s chauffeur is off for the night.”
“I’ll drive,” interrupted Uncle Joe. “You’re not going to risk your life, again by the way, without us there to help you. I still can’t believe you let me think you’d had a psychotic break, when you were really fighting Nazis.”

“Let me get my purse,” Liz said. “Paul, grab the medical kit, Leora, can you grab some stuffed animals out of the cedar chest please? I won’t pretend to know what you’re fighting Darcy, but those kids will need support. I might not have raised close to thirty daughters, but by god I know how to comfort a child.”

“Don’t bother fighting it, Dollface,” Bucky warned. “I’ve seen that look before, it means we couldn’t stop her with a battalion of Sherman tanks.”

“You’ve never met my mother, where did you see that.”

“You face, you two have the same ‘running will only delay the inevitable’ face.”

“I hate you a little right now. Okay, Maya, would you mind staying and house-sitting for them? If it’s what I think it is I want my family safe. There’s an emergency contact list with the numbers of everyone in town we’re related to on the inside of the upper pantry door in the kitchen. Don’t burn anything down unless strictly necessary.”

“On it Mom. I won’t let Nana and Grampy’s house get blown up, and I won’t let any of the uncles or cousins get hurt.”

“Good girl,” Liz said as she reappeared.

Before Bucky could fully process any of it, they were landing right before another small plane touched down. Nat nodded at him and Clint and they went to secure the Twins prior to the chaos that hit everything near them getting out of hand. Caddell practically launched into his arms as Clint caught Collin.

“Hey there, little man. What’s wrong?”

“Gibearnach,” he hiccuped. “Gibearnach uilebheistean.”

“I don’t speak Gaelic, Caddell. I know everything is scary and upsetting right now, but I can’t help you unless I know what I’m fighting.”

“There were squid monsters,” he said softly. Bucky’s heart stopped.

“Okay, thank you for telling me, that was very brave. Squid monsters are scary.” Bucky focused on keeping his voice level but projecting to the adults as Collin squirmed out of Clint’s grasp to climb up Bucky’s left. Fortunately, a side effect of the serum was the ability to carry two distraught four year old children if they didn’t squirm too much.

“Monsters?” Joe asked. “They stole a plane because…”

“Uncle Joeseph, if you plan on seeing tomorrow, do not finish that sentence,” Nat said. “There is only one thing those two would ever call a ‘squid monster’, and that’s an image everyone on this roof should hate. Who had the squid monster?”

“Leam-leat,” Collin said over Bucky’s shoulder from where he was hiding his face in the long hair that his brother had tugged free of the band. “He said he’d feed us to the squid monster if we didn’t behave. It got lots of heads, so lots of mouths to feed, an’ we were being bad little brats.”
“Well now Leam-leat gets fed to the Nat Monster,” Clint said as Natasha’s face darkened.

“Nat Monster is the bestest Monster,” Caddell said with authority. “Nat Monster scares all th’ bad monsters into hidin’, because Nat Monster is a better monster than they are.”

“That she does,” Bucky said, sharing a fang bearing grin with his daughter. “And the guy with the squid on his side is wrong, the plural of brat is brat’ya, and you’re good brothers.”

The twins giggled at his joke. They liked his language puns.

“Okay, brat’ya, let’s get you inside so Nat Monster and Darcy Monster can plan,” Clint said. “Darcy Monster brought extra family and they have snugglies for you.”

Inside, he got himself situated on the extra big armchair recliner and let the boys find good places on him to snuggle, noting an interesting desire to stay close to his metal arm. They carefully selected a neon blue platypus and a faded purple tribble out of the stash Leora gathered, and let Liz lay a thick blanket on the three.

“I used to give this to Darcy,” she mused. “She insisted it had magic no-monster-attack powers because she never got attacked by monsters when using it.”

“Monsters would be silly to attack Darcy Monster,” Caddell said sleepily.

“Mhmm, she taught Nat Monster how to scare bad ones,” Collin finished.

“Even the best Monsters have to be children at some point,” Paul said, following the logic perfectly. “Do you want to grow up to be like Nat Monster?”

“No, I wanna be a seidmadr like Unca Loki,” Caddell said.

“I wanna be an Agent, like Mommy,” Collin added. “Is Mommy safe from the Squid Monsters?”

“I’m not sure the Squid Monsters won’t become calamari,” Bucky said. “But we can ask Unca Paul and Auntie Liz to go tell Steve you want to make sure.”

“Okay,” came two sleepy voices and then the boys became lumps under the shelter of a metal arm and a magic blanket. Paul and Liz nodded at him and went to tell the strategy team about the boys’ worry.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Can of worms- big messy issue.
Devochki- girls (Russian)
Allo Mama- Hi mom (Russian)
Natka- Natasha's baby name.
Vikitsa- Maya's baby name.
Mensch- good person, special helper (Yiddish)
Rugalach- a tasty cookie found in many Kosher cook books.
Mad Hatter- Darcy Code for Thanos.
Shrink- therapist.
Code Chartreuse- the Harrow boys broke out of child care.
Scramble- slang for getting ready for an emergency quickly.
Eye only- a play on Eyes Only, meaning classified, but meaning only Fury knows.
Gibearnach uilebheistean- squid monsters (Gaelic)
Leam-leat- two-faced betraying bastard, or something similar (Regional Scottish slang)
Brat- brother (Russian)
Brat'ya- brothers (Russian)
Seidmadr- Master Sorcerer (Asgardian)

Notes:
Steve is referring to a line in Monty Python and the Holy Grail, where someone accuses a supposed witch of turning him into a newt, then defends his statement with "I got better" when called on it.

My Maya is both a lesbian, and crushing major on Dr. Betty Ross.

Uncle Joe is the same guy who bought Darcy a book on Captain America back in Bodies in Time when Darcy didn't know he'd survive.

Steve makes a distinction between the image (Captain America) and the man (Steve Rogers) because he knows his name and face have been used to do things he wouldn't support personally. He acknowledges the Captain's necessity, but still wants to be seen as Steve sometimes, that's healthy.

Moral injury is psychological damage taken from being forced over personal lines of honor and behavior. Almost everyone can be coerced into fudging the lines they draw between good and bad, and many people experience minor moral injury, but something severe like Clint faced would take a specialist, and there aren't many for that type of trauma, in addition to the trust issues in treating it.

Krav Maga is a very effective fighting style we see Trish Walker in Jessica Jones learn and use. I like to think the same instructor teaches Pepper.

I realize Jarvis seems a bit out of character here, but he's still recovering from AIM and the events of IM3, and so is showing his more human, fragile side to better communicate how not able to handle this he is.

Uncle Joe is using his normal-person psych background here, which is not the right tool, so he erroneously concludes the boys got scared of an imaginary monster in the closet or under the bed. Nat knows that, but she's too upset to tell him that, so she tells him the real reason.

Leam-leat is a really bad insult in the area just north of Edinburgh, and only is used by the boys for Rumlow, who they do not like for reasons to be discussed in ValkyriePhoenix's work.

Calamari is a type of cooked squid meant for eating. It's tasty and probably the only kind of squid Bucky likes. His implication is that Ciara Harrow is way too scary to take on, and Hydra (Squid Nazis) will lose against her, badly.

Teaser:
“One day, ma’am, I fully believe I will wake to find out my job has been made irrelevant because Jarvis and your daughter took over the world as benevolent dictators and nobody is complaining.”
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Darcy plans actions to take to eliminate threats, protect the unprotected, and maybe impresses her family too.

Steve shows Darcy's parents around the tower, lets them watch a training game, and maybe impresses them too.

Bucky wakes up to a magical repair job, talks with a twin, and would be impressive if anyone else were awake.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To ValkyriePhoenix, Beth_Mac, SionnachOiche3, quadrad, SoraSings, Shadows_of_Shemai, Maedae84, Tsita, Snowecat, Joey99, Maharet, halfelf87, Selene_Aduial, MarauderHeir, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, geeky_monkey, TeaAndTricks and the 3 new kudo-ers.

Apologies for the notes going up so late, and my thanks for your patience with me.

Darcy settled into planning mode almost immediately upon getting the boys inside. She called on the members of HERO she knew would be in the best places to lock down the team that was supposed to be watching the Harrow kids. Lucky Thirteen reported back immediately with the assurance that intentionally causing a Code Chartreuse was grounds for suspension pending psychological evaluation. Oculus was apoplectic over the event and prepared to grill them mercilessly before cutting his link abruptly, which startled a good number of the chat room members. She never knew Fury would be so intent on protecting kids herself, really, so that wasn’t surprising.

“And make sure whatever happens you DO NOT let Treasurer find out about it officially,” she said into the voice modulation software Tony rigged for better communication secrecy. “Treasurer, get away from the situation. Pokey Squid needs to think you know nothing. You are full on Hogan’s Heroes-ing this shit, you see nothing, you know nothing, you got it?”

“I think I can develop selective amnesia after all these years as a double agent,” he said dryly. “Don’t worry, it’s not a problem Lieu. I think I need to head out to the Star anyway, Oculus mentioned raiding it soon and getting me off of it is a good excuse. I can’t help anybody if I’m in the middle of the ocean on a ship, right?”

“Good man. All right people, we are moving into Stage Three of Heracles Burn. It’s earlier than expected, but we prepared for this. Alert anyone on your sub-teams that you need for this operation. And Byzantine, I need you to warn Oculus, the ass hung up on me before I could tell him.”

“I can do that. Any advice on what to do when you’ve been assigned a mole?”
“I assume dropping said mole directly into an erupting volcano or extra-large wood chipper from the back of the Bus has been ruled out?”

“Unfortunately,” Byzantine said, dry as the Sahara.

“Sorry Byz, I mostly just shot people I didn’t trust. Have you considered flipping them?”

“It might not be viable, the subject in question is of dubious moral caliber even for a Squid. We’re working on it, or if not, an insanity discharge. Red is very good at manipulation. It’s… disturbing really.”

“Just watch, it gets worse. Over and out and all that jazz,” she said, signing off with her particular code for all clear on her end.

Popping her back, she nodded at her Mom and Dad. They had insisted on coming, they could deal with who she was. It was odd how home turf changed her outlook.

“The boys wanted to know if their mother was safe,” her Dad told her. “You are exactly how I thought you’d be from the transcripts on your War work.”

“Thanks Daddy!” Darcy said smiling. Good to know her Dad got it. “I’ll put someone on Ciara-watch. I can’t use a known asset, though…”

“Call Roy, you still have his number,” Steve said beside her. “He’s good in a fight and you know he’s motivated in this case. If you spring the brother, you have a body guard she’d have to shoot in the head to ditch, too.”

“Good plan, sorry gang, I need to call a highly paranoid former employee of a terrorist. I am so happy we shut them down, we got the best people out of that. Of course, Maya is my daughter, so I might be a bit biased. Anywho, moving on. Everybody out, he won’t like eavesdropping and I need him cooperative.” She waved the group out of the small command room she’d claimed off the main living area.

“I won’t pretend to know what you’re doing here Darcy,” her Mom said gently. “but I will say, I think you do, and that I trust you, if you’ve decided it’s the right thing. You’re good at knowing what that is and doing it no matter how hard. Keep it up, sweetheart, and never let anyone tell you otherwise. I love you, Honey.”

“Love you too, Mom. I’m gonna go chýtise to kakó sto prósopo, now.”

“That’s my girl.”

Steve sort of inherited the job of entertaining Darcy’s family, as she was busy plotting the downfall of evil, and Bucky was busy being near-violently cuddled by the Harrow boys. He ended up handing Uncle Joe off to Betty and Bruce, because the man really needed an update on how Avengers did mental health. It might be the psychological equivalent of baling wire and duct tape, but it held, and Bruce was the most obvious example and Betty one of the better coaches. Paul and Liz mainly wanted to see how they lived when not under siege or experiencing a fecal matter and fan collision and he didn’t have the heart to tell them how rare that was. So in compromise, he took them on a tour while Pepper swanned in and hauled Aunt Leora off to somewhere. He didn’t ask, it was Pepper, when she walked in with a few yards of different styles of fabric and grabbed a bystander, you didn’t ask questions. Asking questions got you dragged into whatever it was. Helping her pick one dress for a charity gala was enough.
Instead, he was helping break some of the odder habits of the team to Liz and Paul. At points, he wasn’t sure he’d made the right call on the lesser evil.

“And this is the training room for the family’s asymmetric warfare group,” he said, waving at the large, platform and tunnel filled room. It was larger than it looked, there were tunnels that led to hidden spaces and areas blocked from sight by overlapped platform cubes.

“It looks like a jungle gym,” Paul said in confusion.

“Paul! It’s very nice. And… colorful.” Liz looked like she was struggling not to insult him over the Crayola themed Jungle Gym of Doom.

Steve laughed. “It’s okay, Liz. It is sort of a giant jungle gym. Natasha and Clint use this room, and both of them need to reclaim childhoods, so we designed it like that. The bright primary colors also make it hard to blend in and that increases difficulty. All the weapons stashes are based on the Home Alone movies as well. Tony came up with that, and scaled things up to fit the area. Actually…it would be easier to just show you. Jarvis, can you cue up the last use of The Toy Box Shenanigans scenario that has Darcy in it?”

“Certainly Captain. Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, the hologram in front of you is read only access footage of a popular asymmetric warfare scenario.”

Steve watched the Lewis’s faces get hit with shock, amusement, horror and love as Darcy, Bucky, Natasha and Clint took out solid holograms of cartoonish bad guys with sized up replica toys. The setting and the size of everything else made the team look childlike. Well, that and the fact that Clint and Nat had gotten finger paints out to do camouflage early in the run and all four looked like kids who got into a paint fight.

“Is that a Furby?” Liz asked in horror.

“Yes ma’am. The scenario is set for use of psychological war as well as standard weapons. We’re still reviewing if that particular tactic would be a war crime, though. Legal is having a hard time understanding why we want to know.”

“It’s screaming ‘death to the Titans, glory to Sparta’ in ancient Greek.”

“Darcy taught it to speak. I think that’s what it says when it’s hungry.”

“Oh, that explains it. What’s the pink one saying?”

“In soviet Russia, toy plays with you. I think that was Natasha, but it might have been Bucky. Oh, wait, no the toy Natasha rigged is the Black Swan Barbie.”

“The what now?”

“There, that thing in the corner the sentry is heading to.”

“Oh God.”

“Yeah, we don’t know why Natasha took an RC motor and rigged it that way. Jarvis gave her extra points for scaring the guards into staying put, though.”

“Please tell me you also do normal killing people stuff,” Paul said desperately, obviously shocked and dismayed at how toys were here being used. Natasha’s methods could do that. Darcy called it Torture by Destroyed Childhood.
“Well, obviously, we do regular training Paul, I just thought you might want to see something less monotonous than a gun range. Those are loud and usually boring. Besides, this is a major part of who your daughter and granddaughter are, and I care about them. I’d like you to be able to accept all of the insanity, not just the prettied-up parts.”

“I didn’t know you could aim Sky Dancers,” Liz said, totally ignoring her horrified husband and the stink eye Steve was giving him. “Mister Jarvis, would you mind copying out this section onto DVD for me?”

“Well, Mrs. Lewis,” Jarvis sounded unusually smug. “I can also make a Greatest Hits compilation for you.”

“Thank you,” she looked at Steve. “You have a very nice security man, I hope he gets paid well.”

Steve heard the tiny crackle of static that was Jarvis chuckling. “One day, ma’am, I fully intend to find out my job has been made irrelevant because Jarvis and your daughter took over the world as benevolent dictators and nobody is complaining.”

Bucky wound up falling asleep at some point, which considering the footing they were on with Hydra was very unusual. He discovered this by waking up to Caddell doing some kind of magic over his arm. Based on the angle of the moonlight illuminating the tiny colored specks of magic, he’d lost a good four, maybe five hours to sleep.

“What’cha doing there, little man?” he asked carefully, not wanting to wake Collin, even if the kid looked dead to the world.

“Fixing stuff.” Caddell flicked his hands in a way that was oddly familiar, despite Loki never doing it that way. Bucky had seen a lot of it in Darcy’s training sessions with her brother. Loki rarely moved his hands when casting spells, and when he did it was never that delicate. Maybe because Bucky had mostly seen battle magic? But what was Caddell ‘fixing’ on the arm that was as clear of danger as Tony could make it?

“Uh huh, what kind of stuff?”

“Well, ’s too heavy, ye’ll hurt yerself. And there are too many places things can get in. It’s na safe. So I’m making tha metal lighter and putting pr’tections on tha insides. Not hard ta do if’n Collin is asleep so I can borrow a wee bit.”

Bucky blinked. Those were concerns Tony had as well, but could only fix with a replacement. He had no idea the boys knew anything that advanced. Well, they did learn from Loki, and it wouldn’t surprise him if the Asgardian had arranged for them to have books for self-study while he was gone. “Don’t make it too light, I’m used to this and I don’t want to have to relearn my body like Steve did when everything was like paper and balsa wood.”

“Kay,” Caddell said, going back to the hand movements, which finally clicked back into place in his mind. The swish, tap, tap, flick, swish, swish, flick was a movement that reminded Bucky a bit of when his Ma would weave on a lap-loom. He had liked watching how she could turn bright threads into pretty ribbons, nicer than anything Becca’s friends drooled over in stores. He’d liked learning to knit, too. His fingers were too clunky and uneven now to do it.

“Hey, Caddell?”

“Yeah?” asked the distracted young mage.
“Can you make the fingers a little more responsive for small motions? I want to knit again if it’s possible.”

“Unca Loki says impossible is for small minds. But I might na be good enou’ yet. I’ll try.”

“Thanks kid. I’ll go back to napping now, okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Lucky Thirteen- Sharon Carter
Oculus- Nick Fury
Treasurer- Jasper Sitwell
Pokey Squid- Pierce
Byzantine- Phil Coulson
Mole- spyspeak for someone set to spy on you.
Red- Skye
chtýpise to kakó sto prósopo- punch evil in the face (Greek)

Notes:
Darcy tends to think in codenames for work with HERO, even when she knows the name.

Hogan’s Heroes was a TV show about a group of men (of very mixed background, much like the Howlies) who reside in a German POW camp in WWII and pull ridiculous behind-lines operations. A famous line in the show is when the guard (who isn't totally bad, just pulled into the dumb war he wants over) walks in on them planning the latest shenanigan and walks off saying "I see nothing, I know nothing."

The Star referenced is the Lumerian Star, the ship Jasper Sitwell was on at the start of CA:WS. In this canon, everyone knows the game with that, except STRIKE, who only know the fake game (they think Sitwell is loyal to them).

Reminder, Roy is my character, his brother is VP's, as is the general Clan MacBain.
Barra is the Twins' dad, and very motivated to protect Ciara, Roy used to work for AIM until Darcy called him in and steamrolled him into the greater Clan Crazy.

Darcy knows how to swear in ancient Greek because her Mom is fluent, due to swapping with Plato.

Baling wire and duct tape are known for being used in hasty repair work, but also for being very sturdy.

The spysassins have their own training area as the skills needed to be good at hitting unseen when you're outnumbered and at a disadvantage are NOT the same as the skills you sharpen when you expect to be in open, mostly even combat. It looks as it does because Tony built it, and why wouldn't he make a Murder Playground?

Furbys are evil, talking, programmable toys that look like the "before" Gremlins in the movie of the same name. You teach them to say things when they want certain things, and if they're hungry, they will bite the unwary.
Barbie has had several ballet incarnations, Natasha's is the one that will do an en-point spin when connected to a small motor. It now is in a new costume that resembles Odile's dress from the Russian Ballet's Swan Lake, and has a large motor, and anything else you want to imagine.

Accepting all the parts of a child is important to their emotional well-being, and Darcy and Nat have enough issues without Paul flipping out about the assassin bits. Steve is totally using his Captain America face and voice on that, because he cares about them.

Sky Dancers were insanely dangerous spinning flyer toys that got recalled due to many instances of kids getting maimed. Aiming them is hard, but not impossible, and this is Clint we're talking about, he knows how to aim Sky Dancers.

Liz is treating Jarvis as a person she just can't see and assumes he's a security man in a room with television screens and hologram controls. She likes him, and he likes being treated like a person by someone not in the know.

Loki is basically the only MCU magic user who doesn't use tiny hand motions to control it. I think he's trying too hard to add masculinity to something seen as 'feminine' to his heavily gendered culture, but knows the boys should learn it right. Also fiber art and cooking and other 'women's work' tasks have elements of what I would call the base of magic, making something from nothing (or from nothing you'd think would do that). That's why Caddell looks like he's weaving on a lap-loom.

The boy's natural but inexplicable accent gets heavier when deep in using magical power, which is why you see more phonetic spelling, because it's unusual for Caddell here. For someone like Roy, who always has an accent, you'll see me write it with vernacular changes more than phonetics, because I assume you know he has an accent. Exceptions when the exact accents effect understanding, as in the classic humor story, An Italian Goes to Malta.

The excess weight and the dust trap moving plates are both things I see as flaws in the arm design, so I'm fixing them now, because I can. Bucky is also justified in wanting the weight to remain near what he's used to so he doesn't lose the ability to use it effectively.

Lap-Looms can make really pretty ribbons, I highly recommend looking at patterns of handmade ribbon online. Knitting is a fun and relaxing fiber art that is easy to teach to children, and Bucky was an active kid with a friend who was stuck in bed a lot, I can see his Ma teaching him to knit when Steve was sick. I head canon the Howlies all had scarves from him at some point, possibly hats and mittens too.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Darcy puts her people into play, and deals with Steve being a Grand High Troll

Steve puts himself in play, and thoroughly enjoys helping Darcy troll Fury.

Pierce is longing for the sweet embrace of total chaos so he doesn't notice a HERO trolling him.

Chapter Notes


Thank you everyone for your patience, I'm hoping that I can get back to a faster update schedule now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy woke stiffly, dragging tired, gummy eyes open under the impetus of the smell of fresh coffee. She made a sound she hoped was grateful at Steve, bearer of the life-giving nectar. Slugging it back, she was instantly thankful for all the times he’d ridden along on her study sessions, as the coffee was more coffee than creamer, and thus to her own preference, not his. If given half a chance, Steve would drink flavored creamer straight, a remnant of never having enough food and never holding weight. Tony learned to lock the good stuff up and keep an extra fridge stash of the plebeian stuff when Steve had a sticker shock meltdown. Balancing that, her star-spangled man also openly and unironically enjoyed pumpkin spice everything, which was a luxury Darcy hadn’t ever had. He was lucky he could also make coffee the way she liked it.

Feeling moderately more human, she passed the mug back and rolled out into a fresh pair of tactical pants, just in case. She didn’t bother changing out of the borrowed blue Henley she had worn to bed or brushing her teeth, people could deal with it, she needed to get to the situation room.

“What’s our status on the squid issue from last night?”

“Peggy’s niece is pretty sure someone way higher than is good to have on the wrong side pulled strings. Crossbones got suspended without pay pending psych review, but not fired. Fury’s in a bad mood, for him, I mean, and someone who I’m a good eighty percent sure is related to Jones called in to tell you the free-range squids are restless.”

“Triple Threat?” she asked, there were five Jones descendants in HERO, but only Triple Threat had any reason to give her a pulse on squid behavior. The others were an accountant, doctor, translator
and retired Marine. Although she might get a call from Boomdeyada, it was unlikely, the woman was trying to rebuild her life after a stint as a POW that ended about like Tony’s had.

“Yeah, think that was the name. Called you ‘Sassy Mama’ actually,” he said, eyebrow raising. “Should I be worried?”

Darcy burst out laughing. “Dude, no. I’m about as on his list of options as his bio-mom. He just likes teasing me. Pretend he’s the Derek Morgan to my Penelope Garcia. We have wildly workplace inappropriate conversations, give each other a multitude of snarky pet names, and would gladly take a bullet for the other, but would freak if we had to fake-kiss.”

“Okay, I can deal with that,” Steve told her with a grin. “Oh, and your Ma wants to know if it would be okay for her to sit for the Harrow kids while we go ‘take out the garbage’ for SHIELD. Her phrase. Ciara is still radio silent, so we nominated you to pick. You’re good at deploying resources. And you were asleep when she asked.”

“I hate you.”

“I know.”

“You’re using it wrong.” Darcy sighed as she hit the large living room. Her mom was happily chattering in ancient Greek at the Twins, Bucky was practicing some kind of dexterity testing with his metal arm on a hologram, and they were the only ones not acting like a major world order was about to topple ahead of schedule on the say so of kids too young for kindergarten. She kissed her Dad on the cheek, squeezed Bruce’s shoulder in a way she knew would drop his tension and surveyed who she had.

“What’s the plan, Peanut?” her Mom asked.

“I’m going to need Nat and Clint back at HQ, someone’s a bit too interested in keeping Crossbones in play, so we need to set up active surveillance before he returns to work after the inevitable clean bill of mental health. You two mind playing Happy Agency?”

“Nope,” Clint said easily. “But everyone at the Triskelion knows how much I care about the boys. If I go back, and they’ve been reported missing, I’ll need to flip out and possibly get myself disciplinary action to hold cover. Same if people knew that they came to us.”

“People don’t, the boys got quietly Amber Alerted,” Steve added. “Sharon told me.”

“What are your more common disciplinary options?” Darcy’s Dad asked. She didn’t know where he was going with that but nodded at Clint.

“Paperwork with May so she can keep an eye on me if it was a prank gone awry, training baby-agents until I beg for a chance to escape the mediocrity if it was on a mission, and field separation from Nat if I got violent. Somehow, they think she’s the bad influence.”

“Oh posh, Natasha is perfectly controlled in her violence,” Uncle Joe said. “That sort of restraint is close to pathological in some ways, but I’m not arguing if it works.”

“True, but if you’re split up, won’t you cover more ground?” her Dad said, and Darcy’s brain was whizzing down the tracks he laid out. She’d grown up on ‘what if’ history games and military tactics of eras long past, she knew how her father thought.

“Clint, go ahead and blow your lid, I’ll get Nick to put you somewhere useful. Nat, can you pull the ice to his fire?” Her daughter nodded. “Good. Bruce, I’ll want you in D.C. in case we need Hulk,
but not in a SHIELD safe house. Those two words do not go together for now. Bucky, you need to stay back, we can’t risk them deciding to shoot you in the head if they spot you doing a museum tour or something. We’ll call you on an encrypted line every night.”

“Where are you going?” Bucky asked her.

“To join a secret government agency that I don’t trust, duh. If you can’t beat them, join them, then beat them from within.”

“Okay, what should your family be doing?”

“Stay here, mooch off of Tony and Pepper, watch the kids. It’ll be tough, but you all had to handle four year old me. That was a good beginner level for handling the Harrow kids. Boys,” she said, drawing solemn blue and green eyes. “I know you like mischief, and I don’t want to take away fun, but please don’t break my family. I like them, and in my line of work it’s rare to have family at all. If you ask nicely, all of them can show you shenanigans that won’t drive them insane but are still fun. I need them safe if I’m going to go beat up the Squid Monster.”

“We’ll protect them,” Collin said fiercely, “you have our swords.”

Caddell nodded. “Unca Loki likes you, we should keep your people safe. If you get sad, we might not get more lessons in breaking physics.”

“I’m not sure if I find that sweet, or terrifying,” Darcy admitted. “You can also try Auntie Jane for natural law breakage, but no poking the wormholes. Some of them spit out into the vacuum-y parts of space.”

“So, we have a plan,” Steve said. “One thing we need to do first, though.”

“What’s that?” she asked him.

“Do your hair, there’s a mat with a bit of last night’s stress-eating caramel popcorn in it.”

“You knew that, and you let me walk out here like that!?! Steve!” Darcy stormed off to fix the issue and ignored all the comments about it not slowing her down any. Of course it didn’t ‘slow her down’ any, badass had nothing to do with good hair. Didn't mean that’s how she wanted her family seeing her in command.

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Steve had discovered a few upsides to being a living legend, most from Tony, who had been doing that for years. And who knew how to take a tiny true thing and make it so big and hard to ignore nobody looked deeper. It was a different form of dancing monkey, one that served him directly, and he had no problems storming into the headquarters at SHIELD full of righteous bluster and disappointment an hour after Clint sent them the all clear.

“Son, you are going to get out of my way, and let me talk to Director Fury in the next minute,” he told the man at the desk refusing to give them site IDs.

“You can go in whenever you like, Captain, that’s standing orders.” Ok, correction, refusing to give Darcy a site ID. Like Steve would go into this nest of vipers without her at his flank to keep him alive. He had more self-preservation than that.

“And my second in command?” he asked pointedly. “The woman who tazed not one but two alien demi-gods, fought Chitauri, fought Hydra, fought AIM? The Avenger? That woman?”
“Miss Lewis is not on the list.”

“I am now,” Darcy said, breaking the stalemate without looking up from her phone. The light from it was washing her skin in lavender, Jarvis was feeling smug. “Refresh your screen, my dude.”

“I don’t understand,” the young agent said brokenly. “You weren’t here a moment ago.”

“Nothing in life is easy to understand, and all understanding comes with a price tag,” she said philosophically. “Steve, you’ve actually been in Fury’s office before, care to lead the way?”

Steve smiled a tiny twitch of a smile and they grabbed their badges and swept into the elevator. He kept his face stern as they stormed Fury’s office, and inside lowered his voice to what, with the muffled barrier of the door, would seem quietly threatening.

“Hi Nick, thank you for accommodating us.”

“To be honest, Captain,” he said carefully, “I wasn’t aware I had a choice in the matter.”

“You did,” Steve assured him. “Stay a loyal HERO, or have us forcibly rip every last suckered tentacle off your tenders. The second option just wasn’t as appealing.” Fury winced, probably more at the reminder of the stakes than at the crude language. “Rest assured, if the rot goes too deep to easily remove, we will do that. I once swore an oath, dead or captured, all of them. I guess my oath wasn’t fulfilled, but I got a chance to keep a promise again. And I will, Fury, even if I have to tear Peggy and Howard’s work down around your ears to do it.”

“He’s not joking,” Darcy added a bit superfluously. “Now be a good director and direct us to our new jobs.”

Fury sighed. “Now I know why they say never meet your heroes. You are a damn pain in my ass, Lewis. You’ll be picking up the slack on Delta, since we had to push Barton over to domestic ops after he punched out Rollins. You’ll be working beside Romanov, given the work relationship there I think you’ll do fine, but you’ll also be filling out for the downed members of STRIKE, since Rumlow is on suspension and Rollins had to have his jaw wired shut. Exactly what the hell did you two do to my archer? He never punched that hard before.”

“We ran the whole team through hand to hand training so intense that he forgot how to be worried he’d hurt his shooting hand,” Steve explained. “Everyone hits harder after learning the muscle memory for it in upper ninties heat and no chance to go in until they land a good hit. It’s almost as good as adrenaline for getting rid of any tendency to hold back.”

“How do you know that?” Fury asked. “You trained in New Jersey, and fought in Europe. Neither is known for upper ninety heat indexes.”

“Darcy trained in Missouri, Sir. All due respect, but have you ever been to Missouri in the summer? Trust us, we know what we’re doing.”

“That… is a very fair point, and someday I want to know everything about that. Not today, though, get outta my office.”

Steve smiled and he knew it wasn’t a smile that sold war bonds, it was a smile that spooked anyone rational. “Sir yes sir,” he enunciated carefully before doing a hairpin turn in unison with Darcy to leave the office.

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Somewhere in a Hydra base, Alexander Pierce was fighting a losing battle for his sanity. How the hell had two prime agents been rendered unusable in the field due to *preschoolers*? He’d understand if it had been a prank gone wrong. Even Nick feared and respected the terrors ability to cause injury and mayhem. But they misplaced them. He looked over at the wall of screens, specifically the one dedicated to tracking the Asset, and blinked. He couldn’t say the two were the first human WMDs to be lost on Hydra’s watch. At least they could only add to the growing chaos and entropy.

“Agent,” he called to an unremarkable junior agent passing by. “What’s the status of Project Insight?” He fully expected the snapped demand to be met with satisfying stammering and no answer, but that’s not what he got.

“The names are being collated, Zola had to be sped up on the algorithm, but if you aren’t picky about safety protocols the hardware is basically ready to go up any time.”

Pierce blinked. How did such a junior agent have all that off the top of his head? He must have been on the team responsible for monitoring the construction. “Very well, when we have the target data, be prepared to send them up.”

“Of course, Mr. Pierce,” he said, walking off flicking a lighter. Or something that looked like a lighter going on and off in his hand, it wasn’t burning him in any way. Well, there were other pressing issues than junior agent… hmm, Peace? Was that his name? On the nose a bit, perhaps, but it smacked of the linguistic irony Insight’s subdirector favored. No time to worry about underling’s hiring practices, he had a loose Asset to find and contain or terminate before Insight launched.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Plebeian- boring or common, not gourmet.
Crossbones- Rumlow.
Triple Threat- Antoine Triplet.
Happy Agency- a play on 'happy family' or acting like all is well.
Amber Alert- the alert on public televisions and local cell phones reporting missing kids in America.
Pull the ice to his fire- to be the cool and contained one.
Tenders- euphemism for genitals.
WMDs- weapons of mass destruction, although in the Twins case, it could be weapons of mind destruction.

Notes:
Steve has access to Darcy's equipment when he's got the watch while she sleeps, but he still doesn't know her people that well. He makes the guess about Jones and Trip based on behavior, as the two are similar, and will probably always think of Sharon as "Peggy's Niece".

Boomdeyada is a made up word from a song, but also the code name of one of the Jones kids, who got it from liking 'Wacky Uncle Jaques' brand of chemical science too much for sanity. Boom.

Morgan and Garcia are characters on Criminal Minds and very much have the friendship I see Darcy and Trip having.
Nominating people who are asleep and can't refuse is a common move that will never endear you to the nominee. Darcy's having a lot more of a cranky reaction to many things Steve is doing due to poor sleep, this is just one factor to the later upsetness. There's no trouble in paradise other than normal things every couple hits. Maybe not involving Nazis, but still, normal irritation levels.

Darcy got a lot of levels in badass from her mom, but her dad is a historian and thus taught her military strategy. He is very quietly badass, which is to be expected, women as BAMF as Liz Lewis do not fall for wimpy men in general.

Steve calls people 'son' when he's a few inches away from punching their lights out and needs their cooperation in not getting on his nerves. This guy is not helping by ignoring Darcy's status. Lucky for him, she has Jarvis in her phone.

Steve is very careful not to say anything obviously incriminating, because even in Fury's office there might be bugs. That said, he's going to make sure the stakes are known. He does not compromise on this.

Training in inclement conditions can do a lot for erasing hesitation. Archers tend to be picky about their hands, as one busted finger can mean never drawing a bow again if it's not treated properly. Clint was also very aware he was a squishy human with a string and sticks fighting in the 'gods, monsters, nothing we were trained for' weight class. Getting him over it was an important step in building the best team.

Missouri has abominable summers, close to Nevada in temp if not higher, but humid too. It's much more the place you learn about heat endurance follow-through training than New Jersey or Europe. For European readers, we get over 38 C regularly. That's why.

Warren Peace of Sky High has been drafted into my crossover ranks as a Baby Agent, and he's undercover. The story is basically he recruited himself to both HERO and Hydra where everyone in both camps would think someone in a different department hired him to work on fixing things. He intends to be sure the Insight carriers to 'go up' alright... in flames.

Teaser:

“Last time I tried to think about what went on in Peggy Carter’s head, she shot me. Six times. In an experimental shield. I learned my lesson about thinking; I shouldn’t. My job is to look pretty and open jars.”
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Sharon takes a hard look at Rogers and Lewis, and is pleasantly confused.

Doom takes a hard look at Lewis and Rogers, and is confused how pleasant they are.

Liz Lewis looks after Bucky, because there's nothing pleasant at all about when he gets confused.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To quadrad, Snowecat, Maedae84, SionnachOiche3, minishadowsoul, ValkyriePhoenix, rosiedeplume, Shadows_of_Shemai, Snowdove30, Crystallea1321, Beth_Mac, Selene_Aduial, Faiteach Saoirse (jaxx), Joey99, halfelf87, Tracysgate, Darylslover33, MarauderHeir, JER, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, Tsita, Jeanieelopez, tigrisilium and the 7 new kudo-ers.

I might not be fully back, but I'm trying to keep up as best I can.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sharon watched Steve and Darcy settle into their roles with an ease she didn’t often see outside career soldiers and spies. If she weren’t 100% sure Lewis was okay or Rogers wasn’t confirmed the real deal, she’d suspect foul play. But she had orders to trust the woman with her other boss’s name, and Aunt Peggy was quite insistent that Sharon listen to Lieu. The spy Lieu, she didn’t know if Aunt Peg even knew about the Avenger’s Lieu. Too many people were using that damn call sign.

Aside from her worry about Lewis, Sharon quite liked Steve. He had all the hidden wit she’d heard about and then some, dry as a bone until the chance to pull out a quip and that shit eating grin arrived. She had just sent Aunt Peg a snap she’d managed to catch earlier of the good Captain’s monument worthy ass when Steve cleared his throat.

“Who ya calling?” he asked. “Fella? Dame? Other?” he teased. She didn’t know where he got so progressive, but it was nice, not dealing with the male bull she’d prepped for on learning he’d be working with Natasha and herself.

“I’ll have you know that was my aunt. She’s an insomniac.”

“Well, obviously. She would be, if you encourage her with naughty pictures,” he said reasonably and Sharon flushed red. “But ain’t it a bit cruel to only send her clothed butt shots? Unless she’s got a heart problem. Best not to send explicit stuff if she’s got a weak heart.”

Sharon had to laugh, Aunt Peggy had been accused of many, many things in her life, but having a weak heart was never one. At least, not that anyone found the body on. “I think my aunt could take anything you could dream of dishing out, Rogers. Don’t start thinking you’re that good.”
“I try not to think,” he said amicably, not defending his masculine pride at all. “Last time I tried to think about what went on in Peggy Carter’s head, she shot me. Six times. In an experimental shield. I learned my lesson about thinking; I shouldn’t, my job is to look pretty and open jars. And other hard to open things, like the unethical mad science lab we got assigned,” he finished, handing her a file. Sharon took it, unsure if he’d used the best example of his earlier life, or if he knew who her aunt was. She looked nothing like Aunt Peg, and Carter was a reasonably common name.

“Aw damn. We got Latveria. I hate Latveria missions, we always have to start diplomatic and then work up to booting the offenders in the rear so they stop. It takes forever.” She sighed. “But we can’t risk old Bucket-face starting a war on us. It looks bad. Stupid image politics.”

“Good thing that Darcy’s specialty is really smart image politics,” he said, shrugging. “She picked out outfits from costuming, she and Romanova are down there now with Dempsey and Tucker. Gender balance is apparently important in delegations, as is respectful attire. Don’t worry, she went the practical edge for the ladies in our group. I’m just worried she’ll put me back in tights.”

Sharon laughed, remembering a hundred stories of childhood about Steve Roger’s loathing of tights, booty shorts, and pants that clung. Not that you could tell from some of the jeans she’d seen him in, those were half spandex and so worn in there was prayer instead of thread holding them together.

Eh, she could handle not knowing what was up with Lewis if it meant getting to know the man in the stories better. “You wanna grab a cup of coffee when we get back?” she asked. She was careful not to take it into reported to HR territory, but also imply that things HR didn’t need to know could maybe be on the table if he played his cards right.

“Sure, as long as you don’t mock my flavored latte preferences and general pickiness in coffee. Darcy still teases me about the Keurig brewer. I’m not cheating on her with the coffee pot, it’s a coffee pot. It just happens to also be one of the best inventions ever. I get my pumpkin spice, she gets her gourmet Columbian dark, nobody accuses anybody of scorching it, and we’re all happy. The inventor ought to get a medal for all the saved relationships.”

Sharon took a second to pick that apart. Oh. Rogers was dating Lewis. Guess she needed to make nice so she could give Aunt Peg reliable dirt. “I’m sort of fond of iced Americanos, think you can control yourself when I place my order? Because I can handle you being hashtag basic, unless you turn into a giant troll if I get my fave.”

“That’s Bruce,” he joked. “But sure, no dramatic overreactions about each other’s coffee. We can talk about your aunt. I know what it’s like to have sleep problems too.”

Sharon nodded and followed him down to costuming. Because what do you say to that?

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Doom was a reasonable man. That’s not what his enemies said of him, but it was true. He just liked propriety and protocol, was that so bad? No, of course not, which was why the polite message asking to meet with him from a SHIELD affiliate was granted. He knew not the Captain, nor the woman who served as his second, but the letter was fully twice as proper as the ordinary missives from that agency.

He had really not expected what he got. Properly attired men and women, evenly matched in genders, led by the firm but polite Miss Lewis. Who was supposed to be the subordinate, which was the only flaw keeping him suspicious as she pled their case.

“You have spoken to Doom quite a bit. Can your Captain and leader not speak for himself?” he
demanded.

“Oh, I can, but I shouldn’t,” the man said with a wry grin. “Opening my mouth around those who could possibly be offended is like doing a slow-fall from a plane. I know how, but I also know everyone I like will be mad if I do. Why do you think I fought Nazis? It’s acceptable to offend Nazis. It might even be a moral obligation.”

“You are in fact the original Captain Rogers?” Doom asked with piqued interest.

“Did you miss the press conference? I already came out to the world after New York happened. I didn’t think people would accept accidental cryogenic freezing without some give on my end. Nobody should just slap the cowl on and start throwing a death Frisbee around and expect the world to believe they’re Captain America. It’s a specific and often unpleasant duty that has before been used inappropriately.”

Miss Lewis lowered her face into her hand. “No, Steve, we do not mention Burnside, we never ever bring up Burnside when we want anybody in Eastern Europe to like us. Go on that rant again and I will drop kick you back to DC. Let me do my job.”

“Is it not his job to lead you?” Doom asked her.

“Only when gunfights are imminent,” she explained. “If it involves anything resembling tact, sanity, or a self-preservation instinct, it’s someone else’s job. It’s always been someone else’s job. That man jumps on grenades and smack talked bull wrestlers when he was two hundred pounds of health issues in a ninety pound sack. We don’t let him play with the grown-ups.”

“Then why is he here?”

“In case you don’t see the logic in shutting down a highly immoral human augmentation experiment being run in your eastern forests. He’s touchy about augment experimentation, seeing as he feels guilty for what happened to Hulk and all those people the Mandarin killed trying to perfect Extremis. My man might not be what anyone would call a smooth talker, but he is excellent at hitting problems until they stop being problematic.”

Doom couldn’t really argue with that, he used similar tactics, the silk glove and the iron fist inside it. Do what he wanted, and be happy, fail him and suffer. They just… divided the two. He nodded slowly.

“You have Doom’s permission to go to the eastern woods to do your business. There are no enterprises there that Doom cares for. Do try not to destroy the forest. There are some rare species in the area, and Doom tries not to hurt the Earth. Wildlife has never meant the people of Latveria harm.”

“Understood,” the Captain said, the glib man sliding behind the mask of a warrior, as hard and real as the mask on Doom’s face. “We will make every effort to limit damage, our own teammate would be unhappy with us if we didn’t. Thank you for not trying to stop us, Sir. I get in trouble when I punch world leaders.”

“You wouldn’t get shit for that if you hadn’t bragged to the Howlies about punching out Hitler over 200 times,” his partner said, her own steel sliding back. Doom watched as the subtle pull of power and allegiance shifted now they had a military target. Fascinating.

“Miss Lewis,” Doom said on impulse as they moved to leave. “If you should ever be inclined to visiting, Doom would not be opposed. You are… interesting.”
“Love to, you’re pretty cool yourself, my dude. I almost ended up working for you once, you know. You sent me the nicest rejection letter I ever got and I wound up being adopted by Norse Deity royalty because of the job I did get. Now I have to go help my boyfriend work off his issues with body modification and consent. I’ll call sometime, we can set up brunch.”

“I won’t let her forget to,” the Captain called back as he placed a hand on her shoulder blades and guided her out.

Doom blinked behind the mask as the pair left. He’d met irreverent and snarky women, but this was the first time he’d seen one so well matched to her chosen mate. There had been a tension, like both were reaching for a third, but it wasn’t a jealous reach. Doom made a note to observe the future exploits of the Captain and Lieutenant.

<^>

Back at the Tower, Liz studied Bucky Barnes intently. He seemed to switch on a moment’s notice from the kind, goofy big brother to the boys and intense, ice eyed guard dog. It would worry her, had worried her, had worried her, until her brother in law pointed out the pattern one night after Bucky had crashed early due to a macaroni explosion in craft time. The boys got scared, then Bucky prowled restlessly like a caged predator, then the boys felt better and Bucky went back to silly tongue twisters in Russian and games of hide and seek in his indoor jungle gym. The only explanation was that he was going on alert from the tiniest of looks, stuttered words, and choice of games. Which was heartbreaking but not as scary.

Liz Lewis knew she wasn’t a superhero like her daughter, but she liked the idea of saving heroes. It was what their family did. So, she recruited her husband’s family, and somehow the richest female CEO in the country and shoe-in for a Time Magazine People of the Year mention soon. Leora had bonded with Pepper over something she didn’t talk about. Liz tried not to think about that, it was better for her sanity than contemplating what sort of rich and powerful mogul could handle Leora well enough they were friends. Regardless, the five of them together conspired to keep Bucky happy. He never lacked for a possible communication partner, he ate favored foods (someday she wanted to meet Mister Jarvis, he was so good to them) and they marathoned Disney movies for him. He liked the newer princesses, the feisty ones. She approved.

She was showing him how to add Braveheart style braids to Collin’s hair when the phone rang. Or rather when Mister Jarvis told them they had a video call. Avengers Tower had all the best toys. Clint appeared on a hologram when Bucky gave permission, and half a braid was doomed to the sudden bouncy excitement of the boy on her lap. After a long, babbled conversation, Collin rushed off to find his brother and Clint turned to Bucky.

“Hey, man. We thought you might want an update, but there are too many eyes on Steve and Darce right now for a direct contact tonight. I’m out of that, since I haven’t even laid eyes on Nat since I got back here, but her cat killed three cameras and a microphone while they were out of town.”

“Pauk adopted a pet cat?” Bucky asked with obvious confusion. Liz wondered why that was so strange.

“Actually, despite never having met the cat, I would say the cat adopted a pet spider. They do that,” Clint said shrugging. Bucky blinked and nodded. “The point of the call though was to let you know everyone is fine, although your girl is now on a watch list, because she got a standing invitation to drop by Doomstadt for tea with Von Doom. I love Mama D, don’t get me wrong, but your girl is crazy. She literally defeated a major evil dictator with the power of friendship.”

“It is magic,” Bucky laughed, and Liz watched Clint light up.
“You watched it! Aww man, you are gonna be so good with Lila and Cooper. But not yet, Ciara’s still out of contact, although based on a few unbelievable reports, she’s fine, the MacBains got to her first. I don’t know how you guys got their loyalty, but you did. I’ve known Very Special People before, and not many would use that brand of special for our line of work. Now, who else was on the list… oh, yeah, I got through to the school, Zoe and Harley are fine, and the Professor wants to know if Tony can spring for a replacement computer lab. There may have been an electromagnet issue I was in no way responsible for.”

“Clint, did you give the techopath your upgraded arrows?” Liz hid a smile at the tired tone, so similar to any mother asking about the empty Oreo container.

“No! I gave the technopath’s sister the old models from SHIELD. Zoe is delicate, and needs to defend herself.”

“Uh-huh. Delicate,” Bucky deadpanned to Liz’s increasing amusement. “Just checking, this is the girl who clotheslined her jerk of a Ma on, and I’m quoting here, ‘freaky Southern Audrey II vines’ right?”

“Escaping one abusive situation doesn’t make you free of predators forever,” Clint defended seriously. “You can fight that your whole life and still run into problems. Or did you forget what your daughter is doing now? What I’m doing?”

Bucky sobered visibly. “No. That’s not what I meant, Clint, you know it. I’m not shaming her, or you, or anybody for it. I just think handing government issue weapons to a girl who’s already had to weaponize herself maybe isn’t a great idea. And yes, I’m thinking of my daughters when I say that. You’ve seen the end results, I saw what holding the gun did to them as kids.”

“Okay, point taken. Wait for her to be legal on the trigger before handing over a weapon. But we should pay back the cost of the computer lab, it’s not like they get government funding.”

“Fair enough, I’ll pass that on to Tony and Pepper. Probably Pepper, Tony’s been overseeing the reconstruction in Malibu. Tell everyone to hurry up, I’m relearning how to knit and I found some good patterns but I need to size them.”

“Alright! Sweaters!” Clint bubbled. “We love you too, you know.”

“I know, call me when I should head down and kick Squid. I’ve got words for the computerized ghost of Arnim Zola.”

“Will do. Hawkeye out.”

The screen blinked out of existence. Liz looked at the hard to read face of the sniper her daughter loved. He looked sad, and hurt, and angry.

“You know, I bet Mister Jarvis could arrange for a personal shopper to help you narrow down yarn choices, Bucky. We could find the right materials for those sweaters now,” she cajoled.

“Yeah, we could. Jarvis?”

“Contacting a personal shopper now, Sergeant Barnes. Captain Rogers filed a preference for small artisanal yarn shops, shall we start there?”

“Yes please. I don’t like how clean yarn has gotten. Find somewhere with a cat, cats have the best taste in yarn shops.”
Maybe, Liz thought, just maybe she’d get to see the Bucky that had existed before he got turned sad and angry, before he was hurt. It was an impossible wish, but sometimes impossible wishes came true for her family. Darcy and her men were thankfully living proof.

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
For further clarification, there are three Lieus, Howlie Lieu, HERO Lieu, and Avenger Lieu. Sharon is cleared to know about all of them, but not that they are all the same person.

I distinguish between ethical and unethical mad science, as there are things in the Marvel world that are mad science, without being morally wrong. Of dubious sanity, like Jane's wormhole efforts that spit out into the vacuum of space, but not wrong.

Steve would not have had much access to any material that conformed to his body comfortably until he got to Darcy's time. The booty shorts over tights look he wore for the USO show would have been chafing, cutting off circulation, and preventing sweat from evaporating. Modern stretch fabrics are much nicer. It's not the fit, it's the feel he objected to.

Sharon in the movie was very good at balancing several ideas in a sentence, as we see when she turns Steve down outside their apartments. Putting a small, quiet, 'I'd like to date you' vibe in a coffee invite without being inappropriate is something she can do. That said, not advisable if your own HR department has fraternization policies.

Keurig brewers are amazing little machines. I'm with Steve on this, and on the unironic love of pumpkin spice. Also, I couldn't help making iced Americano Sharon's favorite coffee drink.

Victor Von Doom is often shown as a hard hearted super villain with no redeeming traits in fanfic, but in canon, he's much more of a benevolent dictator at home, and an annoyance elsewhere. He's big on propriety laws that are a few hundred years outdated and he does take over neighboring land sometimes, but most problems with him could have been avoided by not entering his land uninvited. This fic is pro-complex!Doom.

William 'Steve Rogers' Burnside was a mistake born out of political pressure to make Marvel into anti-communism pro-McCarthy media. He's every single bad stereotype in one Captain America knock off, he even changed his name and dyed his hair to better resemble Steve. Fortunately Marvel fought back by having him go nuts, spout a lot of rhetoric, and become a bad guy. My canon here is that he was recruited to work for the government during that era, got serumed in an attempt to make him like Steve, turned crazy and had to be swiftly swept under a rug. He's not anyone you want an Eastern European leader thinking of.

Bucky is still working with the Red Room knowledge that Natasha doesn't like anything she might accidentally kill living with her. Nat's still sort of there too, but cats don't care. Liho is canon in the new Black Widow comics as adopting Nat.

Bucky is referencing the cartoon My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic. Clint told him of it because his niece and nephew got him hooked, and neither Clint nor Bucky is the
ruin-kids-safe-spaces kind of Brony, they just like the plot lines and characters. It's innocent and they need that, because the two of them see too much bad.

Very Special People are the workers in what are sometimes called freak shows. Clint's known mutants and people with powers who stayed off the Index by hiding in circuses, because he grew up in a circus. Not all of them would have worked the sideshow tents, but all would incite the protective nature of the group that the 'freak show' personnel tend to. Also, nobody in their right mind would have used powers for SHIELDRA, the group was practically tagging powered people like deer. Clan MacBain aren't working for an agency, though, they're helping a specific family member.

Audrey II was the carnivorous monster plant in Little Shop of Horrors. The props for the larger Audrey's I've seen look a bit like kudzu vines, hence the comparison.

Both Clint and Bucky have good points here about abuse, but they're at very different places in their personal growth. Clint is coming at it from an adult survivor of childhood abuse perspective, and Bucky from somewhere closer to eldest abused sibling. One is focused on preparing to live with the history and fight against it, the other is trying to mitigate damage as it happens. Neither is really what Zoe needs, but they work out a good compromise.

Personal shoppers are great, and many CEOs have them on call so that they can get basic stuff done while also working to keep the company going. I'm picturing a set up like Ysabetwordsmith's work Keep the Homefires Burning, with a camera and such, and bringing the yarn back to be sent up for Bucky to feel before going back to buy the bulk.

Small, independent yarn shops with cats living in them are better. It's just science.

Teaser:

"Thanks man. I needed this."
"Hey, what's the Department of Veterans Affairs for?"
"Helping veterans have affairs?"
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

They attack the Lumerian Star, Steve goes to the VA and Bucky gets ready for a job.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To ValkyriePhoenix, minishadowsoul, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, Maedae84, halfelf87, Shadows_of_Shemai, UltraCute, quadrad, phoenix_173, Darylslover33, Joey99, sara47q, Tsita, Beth_Mac, SionnachOiche3, Notashamed, Selene_Aduial, mystormygirl1 and the 6 new kudo-ers.

Also, extra love to my shoulder devil contingent, y'all know who you are.

Some dialogue lifted from CA:WS.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy grinned a predatory grin as the ramp lowered over the ocean. Steve was giving orders, but that wasn’t what she cared about at the moment. She knew her job, Nat knew her job, Steve knew her job, and the other assholes were likely Hydra and thus didn’t count as they should under no circumstance know her job. The message to hit the Lumerian Star had come as a surprise, but it meant Treasurer had finally succeeded in his years long mission. They’d had to cancel on the call to Bucky that night, but hovering in the air not far from the ticket to victory made her giddy.

She was finally going to find Arnim Zola’s computerized ass and waste him.

“You know, if she keeps this up, you could get a date with the nice girl in accounting,” Natasha said in the slow, lazy manner that Darcy knew meant a joke. “If you asked, she’d say yes.”

“That’s why I don’t ask,” Steve said cautiously.

“Relax, Cap, I know she’s only trying to get a rise out of you, as she’s terrible,” Darcy told him. “She and I both know you’re both too scared of women and too busy to even try running out on me. Face it, you are horrible with women who aren’t family, and yet without the women who are, you’d be dead in a week.”

“I’m horrible with them, too,” Steve said cheekily. “The USO produced a few heart attack moments involving dancers and singers I worked with, and those girls were like sisters as far as I was concerned. And you know how Peg and I were, yet… well that didn’t run smoothly. Ever.”

“Yeah, you alienate most of the women who are into you. Guess you’re lucky I’m stuck with you. What else would you do on Saturdays?”

“Well, the old Barbershop Quartet is dead, so not much.” The ramp lowered, and he back flipped into the ocean.
“Was he wearing a parachute?” Rollins (now free of jaw wires) asked cautiously.

“No, no he was not.” Rumlow added with a chuckle.

“One day, I’m going to find the moron who told him that Clint beat his non-fatal airborne shenanigans record. And on that day, I will put my boot so far up their ass that they taste shoe polish for a week,” remarked Darcy genially and excessively casually. Steve hadn’t told her who had prompted his new plane nonsense, but she’d place money it was one of the SHIELDRA chuckleheads in the jet with her now. “Ready, Widow?”

“Da.” Natasha snapped the clips that allowed for a buddy chute to Darcy’s flight harness and leaned, so Darcy launched with stronger legs and let her more skilled daughter guide them down. She kept her own hands free for weapons. The unclipping maneuver went swiftly upon landing on the deck and the two women broke ranks with each other, brushing elbows in silent thanks. The redhead vanished towards the engine room and Darcy tugged her shadow dark scarf up to mask pale skin as she slipped into the darkness. The mission was fairly simple, and she could almost ignore her part in favor of listening on the coms, it was so simple. That didn’t mean she would.

Guards dropped with a near silent hum of electric power and Darcy eased them to the floor as she passed into the computer lab. One drive went in, and the download initiated automatically. She ghosted to the door facing into the main ship, stepped out into the lit hall, and another guard fell to her quietly. She stepped back in, removed the drive safely, and like she’d been coached, the second drive went in, erasing and rewriting and defragging and reformatting until the Lumerian Star was a floating metal can for all the good it could do Hydra as a control platform. She slipped out again. Easy.

Not that Steve had ever liked easy, Darcy thought with a sigh as she heard him challenge the mercenary named Batroc over the coms. She pulled out the Starkphone with Steve’s personal tracker information and followed the diagram to where Steve had just dropped his shield. She swiped at Batroc up the head in her standard corrective headslap pattern and watched as the tiny embedded plates in her glove turned a light smack to his skull into a knockout.

“Voyons voir? Let’s see?” she asked her man, arms crossed. “Seriously Steve? Come on you lunatic, no more fun, we have work. You can play with the mercenaries another day.”

“Aww, Darcy,” Steve pouted. “Where’s your sense of excitement? He’s a really good fighter, I wanted to know if I could take him.”

“You can. You’re worrying me, Steve, with all this kidding around on missions. I swear, there are times I think you should take your jogging buddy up on his offer. You like fighting way too much. You’d think a guy would get tired of it.”

“After my childhood? No chance. Everything I can do now I couldn’t do then… Darcy, it’s the best. It has to be. Or why was what I let happen a good thing?”

She sighed. “Okay, fine. But this is my last act of kindness to the elderly for the next twenty-four hours, there’s a cluster up ahead, be done by the time I get there.”

“Thanks Angel, you’re the best,” he yelled, dashing off. Darcy felt the solid body appear beside her and for a moment, forgot it was Crossbones in the shared look of bafflement on his face.

“Why do I love that man, again?” she asked the Agent.

“He’s Captain America?” Rumlow guessed and like that the moment was snapped faster than one of
her hair ties.

“Oh, yeah,” she said sarcastically. “The righteousness and symbolism are real turn-ons, and the especially patriotic sex is fantastic.” Rumlow laughed and she reminded herself not to shoot him. Yet.

“Well, the man does have a good ass,” he offered and she let the rage bleed out in an evil smile. Let him take it how he would.

“That he does, Brock, that he does.”

Steve knew Darcy’s joke on the ship had been just that: a joke. Darcy wouldn’t ask him to do something like that unless he was ready, but he still thought getting an outsider to help him was a decent idea. He missed Simmons. So, he swung by the VA after goading Fury into a reason to show them the Insight bay. Darcy had been stepping up the counter surveillance and they now acted at all times (well, while they were out of their carefully scrubbed out apartment) like they would if Hydra were watching. It was a lonely way to live.

He listened as Sam Wilson talked to his group about carrying baggage, respectfully staying out of the way until the group broke up and Wilson came to see him.

“Well, if it isn't the Running Man.”

“I saw the last few minutes,” Steve said casually. “It was… intense.”

“Yeah, brother, we all got the same problems. Guilt, regret.” The look on Sam’s face made Steve forget why he had come. Suddenly helping the guy who helped everybody else was more important. He could call home and ask Betty to help him later, Sam was trying too hard to stay pulled together. The man couldn’t risk letting what needed to give, actually giving.

“You lose someone?” he asked gently.

“Yeah, my wingman, Riley. Just a night mission. A standard PJ rescue op, nothing we hadn't done a thousand times before, till the RPG knocked Riley's dumb ass out of the sky. Nothing I could do. It's like I was up there just to watch.” His tone was level, but Steve knew the look in his eyes. The way he balanced on his toes like he wanted to fall, and fall, and maybe fly but maybe die.

“I'm sorry. I've had that happen. It's awful, not being fast enough or strong enough or just in the right place to grab the one guy you were so sure would get out. Knowing they'll fall, and gravity doesn’t care about how you feel.”

Wilson’s eyes went soft with memory, his taught, careful look going inward as Steve disappeared behind whatever vision memory was serving up.

“After that, I had really hard time finding a reason for being over there, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Steve assured. “I crashed a plane to not be over there, so you're probably ahead of me in reasons to do stuff. But you're happy now, back in the world?”

“Hey, the number of people giving me orders is down to about zero. So, hell, yeah.” Sam’s voice brightened and the unnamed thing soldiers share when they talk about pain passed between them, letting Steve know it was going to be alright. “You thinking about getting out?”
“No.” He couldn’t, not until Hydra was dead or captured, every last one. But after? “I don’t know. To be honest, I don’t know what I would do with myself if I did.”

“Ultimate fighting?” Sam suggested with a funny dip and bob maneuver. Steve chuckled. “It’s just a great idea off the top of my head. But seriously, you could do whatever you want to do. What makes you happy?”

“Helping,” Steve said on instinct. “I’ve always liked doing things I could, so others could do things they wanted. I kinda thought that was what I was doing, that I was doing the right thing… but I’m not so sure I know what that is anymore. I thought I could throw myself back in and follow orders, serve. It’s just… not the same.”

“You know, and don’t take this wrong, but back in the last war you fought, the people ‘following orders’ weren’t always the ones helping. Sometimes the best way to do that… is to buck the system, ignore the orders, and do what you know is right. I wouldn’t say that to the average vet with a hard past, but if I can’t trust Captain America to know what’s right, who can I trust?”

“My best girl. She’s a lot smarter than I am. I’d be dead so many times over without her.”

“The pretty redhead?” Sam asked. Steve laughed.

“Oh, oh god, no. Not her. If I tried, she’d kill me, then her fella would kill me, then my girl would kill me, then the jerk who fell off a train in the alps would find a way to kill me again.” He tried to picture the looks if he ever made a pass at Nat, and started laughing again. “Man, I’m sorry, I don’t know why I’m taking it like this.”

“It happens. My professional opinion, you get your ass home to your woman, you snuggle up to her real good with that Troublemaker soundtrack I told you about playing, and you tell her you know she’s smarter than you. I don’t need or want to know what happens next, but I can guarantee, it’ll be good for you.”

“Thanks man. I needed this.”

“Hey, what’s the Department of Veterans Affairs for?”

“Helping veterans have affairs?” Steve asked mock innocently and Sam flipped him off as he left. <^> Fury broke into Darcy and Steve’s apartment while they were on the encrypted video chat. Bucky knew his own image was blocked by Jarvis, but he could see the break in, the subsequent tying down of the intruder, and the ski mask removal that revealed the Director.

“Fucks sake, what the hell, Nick? Don’t you know what doors are?” he heard Darcy demand.

“My wife kicked me out.” There was a laden pause.

“Okay. That was unexpected, I sort of imagined that would take longer, but we can deal with it. You take the ring back?” Darcy asked.

“Yeah, I did. Not like I don’t think you have a duplicate.”

“I don’t. Diamonds ain’t cheap Nick. Look, you go use the bathroom in there. You so need to be dead to the world, man,” she said shaking her head. She turned to the screen. “Guess it’s time to not just come in from the cold, but go ahead and move into Spring.” He nodded at the code, knowing
she couldn’t see him but unwilling to talk with a near stranger on her end who hadn’t been zapped. He clenched a fist to close the call, and went to ensure the Twins knew to stay safe and protect Darcy’s family, and vice versa.

Time to get to work.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Treasurer- Jasper Sitwell's under cover HERO name.
Waste him- kill him.
Best girl- girlfriend.
Come in from the cold- spy speak for leaving a cover and going home.

Notes:
With the new and mostly sped up timeline and the AU, Sitwell went out to the Star to get the drive that could lead them to Zola, without it looking like he had. He's giving Darcy a cover story. I'm also going to say that because of the speed-up, the Star would have remained a part of Insight, except Darcy did the computer equivalent of napalm baths on it.

Buddy jumps are possible, and there are some fun videos of them on YouTube. It's a bit awkward, and there is no cool walking away from the chute scene like in the movie, but it saves Darcy having to get certified on a chute.

Steve is showing 'justification urge' about his body. He has now seen way too much Bad Shit come of Erskine's idea that helped him, and so he's trying to balance the scales, even though it's not his job, nor healthy.

"Just following orders" is the Nuremberg Defense, used in the war crimes trials after WWII. In general, 'following orders' is only as good to do as the orders and the person giving them are. People who knew very little about the higher ups plans can use this, but there are lines past which it is on you for not stepping up against a bad leader. Morals can become fuzzy with enough trauma, so telling someone with a less idealistic world view and similar trauma to stick it to the man is dangerous, but Steve's being pretty solid here about the right thing, even admitting he doesn't have a definition.

A linguistic note for English as a second language readers, the DVA uses the word Affairs as in business, but Steve's use is closer to love affair.

The overheard conversation is in code, but is basically that Fury is on the run, he has the drive, Darcy did not make a copy for resource reasons, and she wants him to fake being dead. The last line is to tell Bucky to arrange to join them, as Spring comes after Winter.

Teaser:
It was the day Trainee Sixteen died in the fire of Talia’s rebirth.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Steve and Darcy escape SHIELD, go on the run, and take their family to destroy a monster together.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Maedae84, Darylslover33, xSUPERCIGIRLx, quadrad, rosiedeplume, Beth_Mac, sara47q, dearestpersephone, ValkyriePhoenix, minishadowssoul, Tsita, Shadows_of_Shemai, SoraSings, Notashamed, Selene_Aduial, JER, Joey99, mystomygirl1, and the 4 new kudoers. Thank you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy felt the anger in her rise to a fever pitch as Pierce questioned them on Fury’s disappearance. He was saying death, but Darcy knew you had to be an idiot to think Nick Fury was dead in absence of watching the life go out of him personally. She'd like to believe her enemies were imbeciles, but that was too unlikely given earlier successes. For some reason, his lines of questioning seemed to be implying a bizarre, telenovella style love triangle murder. Which, one would never happen, Fury wasn’t her type and she was sure she wasn’t his, and two, presumed Steve was the self-righteous religious nut job some of the worse propaganda pieces made him out as.

“I’m sorry, Sir, are you implying Darcy killed Fury because I was stepping out on her?” Steve asked, helping her pull back her rage as Pierce blinked. He obviously hadn’t realized his insinuations could go that direction too.

“Well, Steve,” she said with a smirk at the uncomfortable head of Hydra. “You were raised in 1930’s Brooklyn, and you did cohabitate with a very attractive man most of your formative years. It’s easy to look at your history and wonder if you’re into men at all. I would never blame you for it, as long as you chose to be safe in whatever actions you took and came to me with what you needed before trying to find male companionship. But Fury doesn’t strike me as that into you. No offence, but he thinks you’re a little shit.”

“That’s true enough,” Steve shrugged. “Anything else… sir?”

Pierce waved them out of the office and Darcy peeled off to take the stairs when she saw a poorly disguised brawler dressed like an accountant get on the elevator. Steve followed with no words, but she could pretty much feel the confusion dissipate as Rumlow stepped onto a landing.

“Whoa, big guy. I just want you to know, Cap, this isn't personal.”

“I gotta be honest, it kinda feels personal,” Steve replied, “before we take this further, are you sure you want to do this here?”

“He has a point, Brock. This terrain, our respective styles, you’re going to lose,” Darcy added. She
shook out a slim shock wand from her sleeve and turned it on. Tapping it on the metal railing, it sent sparks up. “Both of us trained in ignoring that, and our suits cover a lot more than your tee shirt with a lot better shock resistance. You really wanna risk your animatronic replica brain on high volt, high amp electric shock? Your choice, but I wouldn’t.”

“That’s it, you little… we’d hoped to recruit you, you know, give you a chance to win. You could have had anything you wanted.” Darcy let out a small sigh. All she’d ever wanted were things she pried away from Hydra, things she got from defeating them.

“That’s funny,” she deadpanned. “No thanks. I don’t like your offer, I don’t want to join you in anything, and I’ll take the dignity of saying no to you over anything you could offer me. No Scrubs,” she added.

The fight was swift and brutal, and she left Rumlow drooling on the stairs as she leapt a railing to kick the third guy to come up as Steve covered their backs with his shield. They made it to the garage and onto a bike, which she narrowly kept upright as Steve took on a quinjet in hand to hand.

“Show-off!” she yelled as he took the motorcycle back. “Head to the meet, Nat and Clint can bring us what we need!” He nodded and she tucked in close behind him.

The meeting place was a gigantic mall. It allowed for maximum dead-drops, double backs, costume changes and alibis. It was also a bitch and a half to get hidden parking at, so before then, they swung past a rec center, ducked in the locker rooms, ditched everything on them in duffel bags that they pulled stashed clothes out of, and regrouped under the bleachers.

“This is not what teen movies prepared me for happening under the bleachers with a cute guy,” she remarked as Steve braided her hair quickly.

“Be happy, this place is gross. Okay, you’re all braided back and I’m pretty sure that design took a good four inches off your perceived length.”

“Awesome,” Darcy said, jamming a red beanie on her head as she popped her lips together to spread the pink sparkle gloss she was wearing. It wasn’t her color, but it was unfortunate enough that nobody would believe she was wearing it.

“Did you put in color contacts?”

“No, purple eye shadow. It messes with how you see hazel eyes, makes them greener.”

“Huh. Cool. Wanna go to the mall?” he asked in a teasing parody of the teen movies that never told her the space under bleachers was this unwelcoming to quickies.

“Yeah. Bets on if we can make Nat-Nat and the Birb blush?”

“I’m not even going to try, you know that.”

The mall was huge, and Steve would have been lost without Darcy. Stick him in woods behind enemy lines and he was great, ask him how to get from the Gap to the Apple store and he looked like a deer in headlights. He knew it, and fortunately for him, Darcy knew it. She grabbed the drive from Barton while comparing sweaters, then somehow swapped clothes with Natasha in a changing room. Steve was still not entirely sure when the woman tugging him around went from Darcy to her redhead daughter.
“What are we doing?”

“Confusing the trail. Two buff blonde men in glasses, one with a brunette one with a redhead, you switch the men and play up the hair,” she flicked back her hoodie while sliding sunglasses on at a kiosk. “Trust me, nobody is looking at you.”

“But they are looking at you,” he said, nodding to the STRIKE team that had started pointing pathways, over at the entrance.

“Annoying,” she said dryly. “But not the worst. Kiss me.”

“What?” He could feel his voice trying to go loud and high as he fought it down. “Are you insane?”

“Yes. Yes, they do,” he protested as Rumlow came closer. She ignored the unhappy look he shot her to grab his head and rise to press a kiss to his mouth. His brain went blank with panic.

“You still uncomfortable?”

“I don’t think ‘uncomfortable’ covers it. I need seventy showers. You’re Darcy’s kid.”

“I’m not too happy about kissing a senior citizen either, stop whining. There are entire forums on the internet speculating about what I kiss like.”

“Not that I go on. Where to next?” Her phone beeped.

“Jersey.”

“Like my life can’t get worse.”

In the car, he folded up into the backseat for the first leg, before Darcy made him switch places with her on the basis that he made her legs hurt when she glanced in the rear view and he should drive if he felt guilty about sitting to the front. He shared the story of learning to hotwire cars on the front beside Queen Elizabeth. Of course, he had been swapped with Darcy, so the story was a bit more involved than that, but fortunately Clint and Natasha understood those parts. He didn’t have to lie, which he was happy about. He had always liked the truth better, even if he would lie to get things done. Natasha shared her view on truth, which she admitted had been formed growing up in a place that could only be called ‘unconducive to honesty’ by the exceptionally charitable. Darcy managed to get the GPS coordinates sent to Bucky, and a motorcycle with a familiar black clad rider wound up on the turn off with them.

“Is this it?” Clint asked. “I feel like there should be more here.”

“It’s where the drive came from,” Darcy said, shrugging.

“More than that, it’s where I came from,” Steve said tightly. “This is Lehigh.”

“What the ever-loving sweet fuck did they do to my range!” Bucky squeaked out. “Look at that, it’s a disgrace! It’s not got any distance on the damn thing, and why would they move the flagpole? What was wrong with keeping it… Steve?” Steve looked where Bucky pointed.

“Fuck. Army regulations state that building can’t fucking be there. It’s too close to the barracks. Even the quick-up camps that skimmed a lot of rules would never put ordinance that close to
sleepers. That’s foxhole sloppy.”

“So? Let’s go take a look,” Darcy said.

Bucky crushed the lock in his metal fist, yanking in free with force. Inside they found the remnants of the old SHIELD, dusty and abandoned, yet drawing power. He followed on silent feet as the other four examined the power sources. Some buried instinct had him dropping back and drawing a gun to guard the hidden door they walked through, but it didn’t stop him from hearing the computer come to life. He swallowed back a growl as Zola started listing facts. A bloody gash of a grin split his face when he heard the listing for Talia’s birthday. It was the day Talia was born, the day she became Talia, not a subject number and not a cover. She’d always been Natka to him, but that day, that year, was when baby Natka told them she wanted to fight like they did. To be a good person.

It was the day Trainee Sixteen died in the fire of Talia’s rebirth.

His mirth grew as Natasha and Darcy played up ignorance and Clint acted purposely stupid. They all delighted in tricking people into thinking they were less. Clint raised it to an art form. But Steve did have to step in. They shouldn’t waste time baiting the evil brain box.

“Arnim Zola was a German scientist who worked with the Red Skull. He's been dead for years,” Steve’s voice came back, prompting an irritated hiss of static nowhere near as controlled as Jarvis’ sighs and chuckles.

“First correction, I am Swiss. Second, look around you, I have never been more alive! In 1972, I received a terminal diagnosis. Science could not save my body. My mind, however, was worth saving... on two hundred thousand feet of data banks! You are standing in my brain!”

“First correction to the first correction,” Darcy countered. “You were working for Nazis. You were and still are Hydra scum. I for one am not going to smear any country by blaming you on them. You can remain a mental mal-birth of a dark time. And second? The brain thing? That’s gross, and really fucking unlucky for you. Who wants to play ‘give the dead man a stroke’ with me?”

“Fool! You can’t destroy me. It gives you no real advantage, and leaves you ignorant to the truth! You’d be hindering your own aims.”

“And while thinks-logically me says that’s bad, owns-a-weapon me don’t care,” Darcy laughed. “If you don’t have to remember can and should are not synonyms, why should I?”

“You don’t even know what hunts you, Captain. You’ll regret not being warned.”

Bucky took that as his cue and stepped out into the backlit doorway. He let his hair droop and flexed his arm, the plates clicking together. Zola was crowing when he stepped forward. He ignored the commands to attack, to protect the computer, to reset himself, all playing at a subliminal pitch.

“What are you waiting for? Finish your mission!”

“I thought you’d never ask, Sweetcheeks,” he drawled, straightening to aim a gun at the first camera he saw, shooting it out. “That’s for Azzano.” He fired at a screen with a shocked digitized face. “That’s for the experiments.” He shot another camera. “That’s for the fucking train.” He aimed at a spooling reel of tape and fired, snapping the tape and scorching the plastic. “That’s for trying to erase me.” He drew a bead on the drive that was somehow transmitting even this far down, if he was reading the lights correctly. He fired. “And that’s for what you did to my kids, you son of a bitch.”
“You have no children,” Zola answered brokenly.

“Correction,” Natasha said carefully, enunciating every sound in clear mockery. “He has daughters. I am his daughter in any way that actually matters. I was born of the love that two people could have in the worst of places. You are a mental mal-birth and I am a mental miracle of life. I was a flame in darkness, and you tried to put me out. But you failed. And now, I’m Love made flesh, born of the truest love anyone can have for an idea. I guess they were right to say Love’s a bitch.” She tossed a Bite into the wires that fed the terminals with a crackle of electricity and a pop of burning circuits.

“Yeah, but you’re our bitch, Nat-Nat,” Clint said, firing explosives into the rows of data banks. “Wouldn’t have you any other way.”

“Exactly, sweetie,” Darcy said, and Zola let out an electric squawk that had nothing to do with her striking a remaining camera with a vicious bone cracking chop of a sparking hand. “We love you. You’re my kid. And honestly, you didn’t spend enough time with Nana Liz and Great Aunt Leora if you think the damned aggressive bitch in you came from anywhere but my side. The terror of my line is intact, and you do your ancestresses proud.”

“Hey, she could have gotten it from me,” Bucky said in light protest as Natasha’s face reached a serene bliss under the praise. “Ma and Becca were terrifying.”

“They were,” Steve agreed. “Out of curiosity, if Darcy’s your Ma, and Bucky’s your Dad, how do I fit in?”

“In no way that I want to have to name, given the fake-out make-out earlier,” she replied dryly.

“WHAT!” Bucky shrieked beside Darcy and Clint.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Telenovella- a Spanish-language soap opera genre known for extremely out there plots.
Stepping out- 30's and 40's slang for cheating.
Quickies- sex.
Mal-birth- literally, bed/evil birth, not a nice term for a birth that can kill the mother.
Sweetcheks- a moderately offensive term for a woman. Here used with all the salt and sarcasm.

Notes:
Steve being the self-righteous religious nut job is important to Pierce and most of Nu!Hydra. You can trick yourself into thinking you have a moral highground, if your enemy is flawed in ways that can be used. But Steve's flaws aren't of the moral or outdated variety. This causes distress in Hydra, and I'm there for that.

1930's Brooklyn was very gay. The gayest in the state, it'd be reasonable to make the leap Darcy describes, although she knows full well what was really happening, and is just messing with Pierce.

No Scrubs is a song recorded by American girl group TLC, released on January 23, 1999. It was very popular and I can see Darcy loving it.
Eye shadow can change how hazel eyes look, and as best I can tell from looking at far too many pictures, Kat Dennings has hazel eyes.

Steve is from NYC, they have a long and bitter feud with New Jersey, often just called Jersey, the state to the south. His soul died a bit on screen when he told the guy in the store he was going to Jersey for a honeymoon.

For more on Steve hotwiring cars with British Royalty, see Out of Body chapter one.

Bucky spent a lot of time at Lehigh, training with his dad's friends, teaching new snipers, and going through Basic. Disrupting it is worse in some ways to him than Manhattan being different. Manhattan is always changing, that's the nature of the area. Lehigh is different.

My Steve swears and isn't as hung up on the exact rules, he breaks them too often. Instead of having him go chapter and verse, I had him explode about the real danger a munitions building that close to housing is. Which is very, he's right, only in a foxhole would you risk that.

Clint in comic canon has compared acting stupid to high art. He prefers to stay in character, like renowned Method actor, Daniel Day Lewis, according to statements he made to Maria Hill.

Zola thinks they need him and that will keep them from just burning the place down and leaving. This does not work out well for him, as human beings tend to ignore logic in favor of feeling better, as well as the fact they don't really need him.

The relationship soup is complicated, it's easier to just ignore some labels for Nat. Also, she has had to fake kiss Bucky before, so she's aware of the need for/adapted to doing/ignoring things that are sort of gross given the relationships.

Teaser:

They broke me, destroyed me on every level. I withstood torture and brainwashing and captivity, but God as my witness, I could not withstand Craft Time.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Escaping a missile leads to a need for showers. Luckily, Steve knows a guy, and that guy wants in.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To ValkyriePhoenix, sara47q, minishadowsoul, Shadows_of_Shemai, Beth_Mac, quadrad, Darylslover33, rosiedeplume, halfelf87, SionnachOiche3, Notashamed, ClockWeasel, JER, Joey99, tigrislilium, SoraSings, Dances_With_Vulcans, mystormygirl11, Tsita, Lady_Layla, Maedae84 and the six new kudo-ers.

Some (many, actually) lines taken from the movie. I can't improve what the Russo brothers wrote for a lot of this, I can only give more and greater detail of context.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy was covered in soot and coughing from burned plastic as they moved across the camp. She was also smiling, and kept smiling when the bunker blossomed into fire behind them. That was a rocket, a good one.

“You know, I appreciate the desire to blow him up, but they really waited until the last fucking moment, didn’t they? He was basically dead. They could have done this ages ago and saved us a trip to fucking Jersey.”

“I’m pretty sure they were aiming at us, Mama,” Nat said with a wry twist to her mouth. “But if it makes you feel better about being shot at with bunker killing explosives, they desecrated his corpse in a way. He’s not going to be recovering from that. Molten slag does not regrow heads. Now I want a shower. Where can we go to get showers?”

Darcy’s eyes went soft at the ever so faint tinge of whining in her daughter’s voice. She was reclaiming what had been lost to Red Room. “I gave up on assuming anyone would stay dead long ago. I don’t trust death unless I’ve cut off the head, burned the body, scattered the ashes, and waited a few months to see if anything changed. But scattering said ashes is messy and I agree a shower sounds amazeballs awesome. Is it worth going up to the Tower if we’re going back to DC later to gank Pierce anyway?”

“Please don’t take me back to the Tower,” Bucky begged. “Your family was a great help, but I need to not be near four year olds for a bit. I thought I could handle it, but I was very wrong. They broke me, destroyed me on every level. I withstood torture and brainwashing and captivity, but God as my witness, I could not withstand Craft Time. Glitter went places glitter is not meant to go.”

“They do that at four,” Clint agreed. “And you’ll never be sure you got all of it. Glitter is the herpes of the craft world. We still find the stuff left over from Cooper’s fourth birthday party. Pink. I’m
happy he tossed out gender color conventions, but I did not look good covered in shiny Pepto Bismol color. Regardless, if the Tower is out, we should aim back to DC, but none of the HERO safe houses in the area are going to be properly secured at the moment except the one we put Bruce at. We should have had more, but the housing market is brutal. I’m not sure it’s time to risk the Big Guy making an appearance in a residential area yet. He’s good about casualties and handling squishies now, but property still takes a hit."

“Well we are not going to a motel,” she insisted. “We’d get reported to the cops in under five minutes with the way we look. Also, no clerk can give fully informed consent to house the threat we pose by existing near them. I don’t want dead bystanders. So,” Darcy said. “We need a place that doesn’t have a loose reporting system, in the district, with someone who can reasonably take care of themselves, that isn’t Bruce. That… narrows the field. Suggestions?"

Steve stopped walking a few yards from the car. He looked like he’d been hit with a frying pan to the face. “I know someone, but that’s going to be an awkward talk.”

“Jogging Buddy?” Darcy asked. She liked Jogging Buddy, she had never met him, as unlike Steve, she was sane enough to like sleeping in, but she liked how Steve acted after a run with him. And his work at the VA gave him a reasonable chance to understand them.

“Yeah, him. Only… I kind of told him his job at the VA appeared to be helping vets have affairs. And he spent a little time under the mistaken idea that Natasha and I are dating, which I corrected, but led to hysterical laughing at the line to kill me that would cause. I don’t have a good ‘acting stable’ record there.”

“If he wants me to, I will duct tape your mouth shut to keep your foot out of it for the duration of your stay,” Bucky offered calmly. “What’s his name? I’ll have Jarvis pull directions to his house on Rita’s heads up display. You guys can follow me.”

“Sam Wilson, VA Peer Counselor in DC, former para-rescue Airman. Jarvis has military record access.” Steve rolled his shoulders awkwardly. “I don’t like using that information. It feels… wrong.”

“More wrong than sticking around covered in soot and burnt plastic stink for a Hydra mop-up crew?” Darcy asked pointedly as Bucky secured his helmet and hopped on his super bike.

“Showers,” Natasha added. “I will perpetrate a home invasion for a shower right now. Your choice if you get a second of diplomacy first.”

<^> Sam Wilson was having a strange day and it wasn’t even nine yet. He’d begun the day with four Avengers and a really handsome guy rocking the vaguely homeless scruffy look knocking on his door.

“Everyone we know is trying to kill us, stopping Nazis, or otherwise occupied,” Black Widow had said. How messed up was it that Black Widow was on his front step because hidden Nazis were out to kill Captain America who thought Sam was trustworthy based on having given good relationship advice? No more messed up than Captain America apparently dating the scruffy maybe-Bucky and Lieu, at the same goddamn time. Sam needed to get his hands on super serum if it got you hotties like that. At any rate, he did what he thought was best, let them in and checked for tails.

Hawkeye, or ‘call me Clint’, immediately zoomed into his kitchen to make coffee. Sam’s raised eyebrow was met with one word, “Darcy”, and a shrug. Black Widow was pulling an honest to god
flat iron out of her purse as she bee-lined to the guest bath. Steve had taken to glomp-cuddling almost-definitely-Bucky in a way that looked almost drunk while Lieu, the Darcy behind Clint’s coffee pilgrimage if her reaction to half a pot in a novelty mug Sam hadn’t intended to ever use was an indicator, had started braiding his hair.

“I’m not sure I even want to know,” he told Steve. “The last time I made a guess about your love life you had hysterics.”

“We’re a triad,” Darcy told him with a mulish set to her jaw. “I collect super-soldiers. Got a problem with that?”

“No, everybody has hobbies. I’m gonna go make breakfast. If that’s like a thing you guys eat, and all.”

Breakfast went swiftly, Hawkeye, or Clint, had gotten out egg fixings and was converting half a loaf into toast in Sam’s oven like a grandma, so Sam cracked open the breakfast meat. Clint made really nice omelets, his folding technique was amazing. Less amazing was how many times Sam had to put the bacon back in the skillet.

“I’m not giving Captain fucking America trichinosis because you like the bacon still oinking, you ass!” Sam finally snapped. “Let the meat cook.”

Clint blanched, staring at where the limp, under-cooked strips hung off a metal serving fork. “Oh god. I didn’t…. I’m sorry. I’m used to using the range at the Tower when making this much breakfast, it cooks really fast. At my place, I’m the only one who really eats fried meats, and I don’t get food poisoning. Or rather, it takes actual poisoning of my food, not accidental. I forgot Laura put a ban on me cooking bacon for others. I didn’t mean to. I… didn’t realize it wasn’t cooked.” Give he’d eaten a strip, Sam put things together fast. Clint was showing actual signs of having been abused, probably young. It wasn’t his specialty, but some of his people joined up to escape worse things than war, and a few had absolute nightmare stories about boot camp. He also had a guy come in once who came back from an absolute cluster in some war-torn corner of the world with a taste for crickets, this looked like a similar thing.

“It’s okay. I didn’t know you had an Iron Stomach super power. I just thought you were impatient. That’s not what’s happening, so I can back off. But I really do want this cooked all the way through. If I give you the juicer and some oranges, can you make juice?”

“Okay,” Clint agreed. “Wait, you have the good kind you juice yourself? Awesome! Tony is great about getting us kitchen gizmos, but he hates ‘outdated tech’ even if it does the job better.”

“Mama Wilson did not raise a godless savage,” Sam said tartly, getting a grin. “The stuff is in that pantry.”

He got the three Avengers and the now-confirmed-Bucky Barnes to eat, and let them all take a turn in the shower, as they stank, before asking why anybody they knew would try to kill them. The answer made him sick. Hydra hidden in a number of agencies, the Insight project, a massive underground net that fought back, and something they were all talking around about Darcy and Bucky. He got up as they finished, unlocked a desk drawer and gave Steve the files he’d stolen in a moment of undirected anger.

“What’s this?” Steve asked.

“Call it a resume.”
“Is this Bakhmala?” Black Widow, the surprisingly laid back Natasha, asked. “The Khalid Khandil mission, that was you?” Sam nodded as her eyebrow went up in an impressed way.

“Is this Riley?” Steve asked, pulling out a photo.

“Yeah.”

“Who’s Riley?” Darcy asked Steve. “You’re holding back again.”

“Sam’s Bucky, possibly minus the gay.”

“Oh, ouch. Sorry man, I won’t pry more. Loss sucks.”

Sam was honestly sort of confused by that conversation, but he worked around in-jokes and personal code on a daily basis, so he nodded and then looked attentively to Natasha and Clint, who were actually reading the file.

“I heard they couldn’t bring in the choppers because of the RPGs,” Clint said. “What did you use, a stealth chute?”

“No. These,” he told the archer, pulling out the right section. Clint whistled and passed the specs on to the others.

“I thought you said you were a pilot,” Steve said with a bit of disbelief. It made Sam a touch smug, honestly.

“I never said pilot.”

“I can’t ask you to do this, Sam. You got out for a good reason.”

“One, a number of people would site the goddamn Avengers sitting at my table as a good reason to get back in, and two.... Two, I know some of the names you said. I have my reasons. My family has reasons. Now, as to my wings, they are locked up tight. The last pair that still works is at Fort Meade, behind three guarded gates and a twelve-inch steel wall.” Sam knew ‘no’ was an option. Being told it would take too much time from too important a mission. That wasn’t stopping him. “Help me help you. This effects everybody. This effects me. This is one of those things my grandpa called ‘times when they bleed the same’ and I swore to him I would always show up for those. I’m helping you stop these assholes even without the wings and you? Can’t. Stop. Me.”

Steve looked at Darcy and Natasha. The two women looked at each other and had a conversation in Eyebrow, then nodded.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Steve told him.

After that was honestly a big blur, up until he was calling a Senator on a burn phone. It was like his life movie montaged over a major heist. Nobody else saw that as odd, so he tried to stay focused.

“Senator, how was lunch? I hear the crab cakes here are delicious.”

“Who is this?” Stern demanded.

“The good looking guy in the sunglasses, your ten o’clock.” Oh god. The vets were right, this guy was hopeless. Classic can’t-do-shit. Sam sighed. “Your other ten o’clock. There you go.” How were these people so fucking incompetent? “Now, listen closely. You’re gonna go around the corner, to your right. There’s a grey car, two spaces down. You and I are gonna take a ride.”
“And why would I do that? I’ve got Secret Service picking up my car, you know.”

“I’m guessing, but maybe, just maybe, because that tie looks really expensive, and I’d hate to mess it up.”

“So,” Bucky asked from the back seat of the car he’d wound up after Darcy demanded shotgun in exchange for letting their daughter kick Stern. “Did we seriously just interrogate a man using blackboard lasers?”

“Well,” Clint said. “Natasha’s innate terror inducing skills, Steve’s “I’m not mad, I’m just disappointed” face, and Darcy’s uncanny snark powers were also factors. And the wings seemed to impress him too. Nice catch, by the way. He wouldn’t have been as useful if he’d broken his back.”

“Thanks man,” Sam said with extreme dryness. “You know how to make a guy feel better about treason, you know.”

“Eh, I was temporarily turned evil before the Battle of New York. Getting called traitor isn’t super new for me.”

“I’m still convinced Natasha cheated in rock paper scissors,” Darcy complained. “I wanted to kick him off the roof.”

“But she has the best reputation for it,” Bucky said placatingly. “Come on, Doll, you know you like spoiling her as much as I do.”

“No, I never gave her a motorcycle, that’s on you. You spoil her more than me.”

“I didn’t give her Rita, I loaned her Rita, because we otherwise would not all fit in here. As it is we’re lucky Steve has a skinny ass, Clint has no boundaries, and my left arm can’t fall asleep.”

“Speaking of Rita,” Sam said, “Romanov looks like she’s taking evasive maneuvers behind us. We may have a fight coming.”

“Pull over on the overpass, it’s good terrain for us.”

“Are you insane?”

“Probably, but I’m also right. Let her pass, geez, you are worse than Zeke about needing to get there first.”

“I’m starting to hate a family legend. Why was I never told what a troll you are?”

They pulled off as someone tried to shoot out Rita’s tires. “The fuck was that! Who just shot at Nat?” Darcy demanded.

Bucky opened the door as Talia rolled off the bike as it went down.

“Ya budu zabotit’sya o ney. Nayti strelyavshego.”

Chapter End Notes
Translations:
Pepto Bismol- a stomach remedy that is a hideous shade of pink.
Rita- Bucky's Stark-modified super bike.
Can't-do-shit- slang for a hopeless incompetent.
Ya budu zabort'sya o ney. Nayti strel'yavshego- (Russian) I'll take care of her. Find the shooter.

Notes:
Clint does not hold with Pink=Girls and Blue=Boys. That said, even a man who habitually wears purple can tell Pepto Bismol is a bad color.

The housing market in DC really is perpetually bad. The district itself suffers a chronic shortage, because of how many senators, representatives, ambassador aides, etc need to live close to the capitol, plus lobbyists moving in constantly.

Rita the bike has a Heads Up Display, or HUD, in the associated helmet. It works like the Iron Man helmet, for a visual reference. It still works off of Jarvis, not a new AI, the name Rita (after Rita Hayworth) is just for the bike itself, because Bucky felt such a classy lady should have a classy name.

Sam displays signs of training in therapy, but his role looks a lot more like a Peer Counselor, and giving him a medical license screws up the time line, so I'm saying trained peer support, plus lots of experience on both sides of therapy.

Using military records like this is the best way to track Sam's house down, but it's also really squicky and everyone involved is glad Jarvis has a strong moral code.

Trichinosis is a form of food poisoning gotten from under-cooked pork products. It can be pretty deadly. Clint does not react to almost-raw pork negatively because his history has trained a wider definition of 'edible' into him. His sudden guilt is a product of childhood abuse, because he's learned that it's safer to be abjectly sorry than to cause extra irritation in an unknown. Crickets can be really tasty, and are a staple of wilderness survival food, but it's still really weird to watch someone eat them for the taste. Gaining an odd food preference can happen if you're in a place where it's all that you have to eat.

Real manual citrus juicers are way better at making orange juice than anything else. They also will never appeal to gadget aficionados like Tony.

Veterans do talk about which public figures and politicians would have had half a hope of surviving combat. A can't-do-shit is someone they do not respect the ability of, like someone who looks right when told to look at their ten o'clock. I chose to switch it to Stern, as Sitwell is HERO and already told them everything he knew.

Teaser:
“What part of ‘can share a brain across time and space’ escaped your understanding?’ Steve felt silly asking, as he knew that except to people who had lived with that weird a while, none of it made sense.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

A fight on a bridge goes both differently and the same, a tough explanation is demanded, and everyone's a little tense at the end of the day.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To ValkyriePhoenix, sara47q, quadrad, Beth_Mac, Maedae84, Darylslover33, minishadowsoul, Shadows_of_Shemai, AliceMadisonParker, Notashamed, Joey99, UltraCute, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, SionnachOiche3, mystormygirl1, Selene_Aduial and the 2 new kudo-ers.

Be aware I'm going back to school now and may slow down in posting. Or speed up, it's hard to tell.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy was seeing red as she surged out of the car in a sprint, ready to take on the world. She vaguely registered the rest of the fight, but most of it was gone in the wash of anger at the people who hurt her family. How dare they? She knew on some level these people didn’t care about who they hurt, that Nat was only targeted because she was convenient and a thorn in their side. But she didn’t think about that, she couldn’t. She had insisted Nat drive separately because she was irritated at being pushed to a more passive role by her status as a relative unknown. It had irked her that Natasha got to own her badassery. So now, it was easier to think of the shot as a deliberate choice to go after her daughter than a chance attack made open by Darcy’s own actions.

The fight wound its way across the highway overpass, shutting down traffic on both levels. Sam dive-kicked people with his awesome mecha-wings. Clint stationed himself on top of a bus taking down attackers. Steve and Bucky ended up back to back as they had hundreds of times in back alleys. She and Natasha laid traps, sprung ambushes and in one memorable moment of clarity, Nat stole a rocket launcher and used the spent barrel as a crutch. The makeshift bandage Bucky had applied was soaked in red by the time they were pinned down.

“Steve,” Darcy said weakly. “Not now. There are too many cameras. They can’t risk killing us yet.”

“Well, you’re smart on some counts Lewis,” Rumlow said with a sneer. “Get them in the van.”

Steve snarled at the men who collected them, but something about one who got in to guard them struck Darcy odd. She waited, and watched, and Maria Hill broke them out.

“Who’s your new stray?” she asked Darcy. “No offence, man, she just adopts people like crazy, regardless of if you want to be adopted.”

“None taken, pretty lady,” Sam answered with a grin. “And I got brought in by Steve. He couldn’t
resist trolling me. Sam Wilson, EXO-7 Falcon flyer.”

“Ah, you’ve met the real Rogers, then. Apologies for that, we think he may have been affected by the arctic ice.”

“No he fucking wasn’t,” Bucky said instantly. “He’s always been a stubborn, irritating, contrary punk. I’d say he was gonna drive me to an early grave, but that was actually Arnim Zola. Damn train.”

“Cool it,” Darcy warned. “We’ve all run a little hot lately, what with Hydra and HERO and all that. Relax, man, you know Steve and I feel like shit about that.”

Bucky had the good grace to blush as Hill looked at her funny.

“Heroes?”

“Don’t play dumb Picket,” Darcy said, deliberately using Hill’s code name. “Oculus recruited you the day he realized you were on the verge of taking over the world with the Admin staff. You were vetted by a staff of three, including Peggy Carter, then when I got ahold of the files, you were given a sub-command because you’re too competent to waste following Nick and nothing else. You’ve been loyal to HERO this whole damn time. Although I did wonder why you never noticed. It’s not like I used much beyond implausibility to separate my aliases.”

“Oh god. You’re both Lieus.”

“I’m all three, actually. What can I say? I’m not great at picking my own code names and I’m sentimental. Can we blow this popsicle stand already?”

“Yeah, I got a package from Snowstorm that I thought would be useful.”

“All right, I’m sorry, but I need to get some things straight,” Sam said to Steve as the rest of the team got settled into the base under the dam.

“Sure, it can get confusing.” Steve really did feel for the guy, he got tossed in with no warning or time to ease him in.

“Ok, just to get a grip here, that guy used to run the super-secret spy organization that was crawling with people who want you dead, but he faked his death when they tried to kill him, and he makes an unholy number of eye puns.”

“Yup. His name is Fury,” Steve agreed. He hadn’t noticed the puns, but looking back, Nick did have a penchant for them.

“And Fury worked for your girl Darcy in an even more secret spy organization dedicated to combating the people who want you dead.”

“Yeah, she started HERO, the Heritage Espionage Resistance Organization,” Steve nodded, waiting for the actual confusion.

“And Darcy and Bucky used to be Soviet spies, and they raised Natasha, who got away from Russia and went to work for Fury, but was also working for Darcy, as was Clint, who recruited her.”

“Yes. You’ve got a good grip on this for somebody who needed to get things straight,” Steve said.
“Because what I’m worried about is how the hell Darcy got out. You said she had to get in place to free him and that’s why it took so long, but you never said how she got free. How she left Russia. I wouldn’t care, except now that I’m following you her issues sort of become my issues. What am I even looking at here?” Sam asked him. “As a therapist, I mean.”

“We don’t really do the therapy thing,” Steve hedged. “None of the Avengers is that good with the talking issue even without adding the pressure of a formal setting, so we built a support network of each other, non-combatant friends, and what family members any of us still have. And the… relationship soup is confusing even to us. Especially when you factor in the group adoptions and Darcy’s brothers and Bucky’s sister.”

“Yeah, a support net is good, but y’all gonna shatter if you keep avoiding trained help. Seriously, Steve, let me help you outside combat. I’m good at that. I want to be here, but I cannot follow someone into a fight if they aren’t getting competent psychological help. I know enough of my own mind to know that if one of you tries some self-sacrifice suicide bullshit I’m going to lose it. I need to be safe too.”

Steve felt like a real louse. Of course Sam deserved to feel safe, and of course with his background in putting people back together, he’d feel unsafe with people in charge with unknown traumas. It would be the same as the things that had irritated Steve about Fury, the tendency to secrecy and distrust. But Darcy… her secrets were hard. He sighed and opened a link.

I need permission to tell Sam the truth about you, Angel. He’s asking good questions and deserves answers that don’t make sense without the history.

If you trust him, I will too. If he tries to betray us, I’ll tase his brain until he cries. You know, the usual.

“Darcy never left Russia,” Steve said. Sam looked ready to protest when Steve continued. “Because Darcy has never been to Russia. While she was being a Soviet spy and raising Natasha, she was living in the RV of Doctor Foster, helping track down possible landing sites for the Bifrost that Thor uses. The Red Room never knew she existed. She can trade places with people, and sort of… sit beside them in their head, or drive while they sit beside her. Well, with me and later with Bucky, but across time and basically ignoring space all together. She did the entire War in like a month and a half or so. She spent a year alleviating what Bucky went through over his seventy-year captivity. Then again, he spent a fair amount of time in cryo, so it wasn’t a full seventy years for him, either. Time is a flexible concept where Darcy gets involved.”

“That’s severely messed up and I am really glad I’m not a mutant.”

Steve opted not to correct him. “So, does that give you a starting place?”

“Yeah, we’re looking at likely PTSD, moral injury, your standard POW crap, possible survivor guilt mitigated by her dead person living, whatever comes out of not being anchored in a standard cause-and-effect order, and any issues about mutant ability,” Sam counted off on his fingers. “It’s not great, but I think I can deal with this now. Are you sure she was okay with you telling me that?”

“Well I asked first, you know. Communication is a good thing.”

“You didn’t leave my sight,” Sam pointed out.

“What part of ‘can share a brain across time and space’ escaped your understanding?” Steve felt silly asking, as he knew that except to people who had lived with that weird a while, none of it made sense. “We can go back over that, but really, Sam? I’d think that would be obvious.”
“Oh, you can initiate it? That’s… you know what, I don’t have enough training in mutant psych to make a statement, but that seems weird. Damn the VA for not covering mutants better. Thankfully there are a low number of mutant vets, the specialists that come in once a month usually cut it.”

“It’s too bad you don’t have a full degree in that, we really could use a hand with the kids.” Steve thought about Zoe and Harley. Those kids had deserved better, and he wasn’t upset that the team-family had adopted them, but he did wish he knew how to be a decent parent.

“I can recommend a specialist,” Sam offered. “Doctor Grey has great credentials.”

“Doctor Grey is already teaching them. She works at the school we got them into. It’s a nice place, I am really glad Tony’s made of money.”

“You realize that if you sued for your back-pay, you’d also be pretty well off, right?” Sam’s eyebrow was up and Steve laughed.

“Yeah, but it’s fun making Tony foot the bill. He’s always whining about how we use him for his money, but we all know he loves it. Besides, we had to find some solid consequences for his actions with the Mandarin. Just because he’s family doesn’t mean we won’t find ways to teach him not to be an idiot.”

Late that night, Bucky and Steve made a daring escape to go to the Smithsonian. They were chuckling at each other when Darcy caught them sneaking back in.

“Ok, do I want to know what you two are up to?”

“Uh, Dollface, we can explain.” Bucky hastily shoved the package in his hands at Steve. He did not want to deal with angry Darcy right now. They were so close he could taste it, and yet…

“Uh huh. Save it. What’s that, and gentlemen? Do not lie to me.”

“Well, Stevie and I were talking, and I said something about his clothes, and he said ‘If you’re gonna fight a war, you gotta wear a uniform.’ So…”

“Tell me you didn’t.”

“I don’t like lying,” Bucky said honestly. “But if it makes you feel better, sure, we didn’t.”

“Oh. My. God. You two are in big trouble,” Darcy scolded them. “You know how I feel about history! The museum is important, and so is all the stuff in it. I don’t care if it’s a good replica of the original, it was supposed to be educational. I stood up for you when it came to getting back personal items, but the actual uniform was shredded when they pulled Steve out of the ice. It’s not the one you wore. Do you even know if it fits?”

“Give me some credit, Darcy,” Steve said. “I checked to make sure it would fit. I’m not going into battle with a wedgie.”

“We can take it back,” Bucky offered. He knew how important museums were to her, she loved history. He was grateful that extended to loving him, too. “It was dumb, and we’re sorry. What can we do to make this right?”

“Ok, I accept your apology,” Darcy sighed. “I’m sorry too. I’ve been wound way too tight lately and I’m sorry I let that mess up our relationship. You don’t have to put the uniform back, as long as
you promise to make amends to the museum. I can set it up so you can help the Smithsonian curators get the new exhibit off the ground, verifying the facts, telling them about the items on display, answering questions, that sort of thing. What’s a good way for me to show you I really am sorry about the snapping at you?”

“Can we have snuggles?” Bucky asked.

“No, I’m going to be excessively cruel and deny you cuddles,” Darcy said sarcastically. “We can totally snuggle. Are you sure you don’t want something bigger?”

“Angel, we just want to know you still love us,” Steve said, and Bucky nodded.

“I always love you, you dorks. You’re mine and I’m yours, and we love each other. We always have and always will. Now, come on, our bed is getting cold.”

It wasn’t the worst night before a battle.

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
Darcy's description of the fight is purposely very vague, as she's not in her normal state. She's got misplaced guilt issues over making Nat take the bike, because the bike was targeted and Nat was hurt. That said, some of the better things from various multi-Avenger fight scenes got worked in, because I love that Nat somehow got her hands on a big rocket/grenade launcher and nobody in the CAWS canon treated that as a plot hole, presumably because Nat often does that.

Sam may be a reckless, crazy lil' shit on par with Steve, but he does pay attention to mental health and well being. His past makes knowing nobody will do something terminally dumb (like make Hill crash the helicarrier they're on) an important part of that. He makes a good point about support nets and actual therapy. If you or a loved one is suffering from mental health issues, please find a way to seek professional help.

The VA has repeatedly suffered budget cuts that limited the help they could give. I'd assume in a world with active-X mutants, the cuts would first hit the super specialized things that only effect certain types of mutants, and slowly fuck over the whole Mutant Veteran community, because people are horrible like that.

Yeah, it's Doctor Jean Grey. The Keeners are at Xaviers, but I'm not going to bring in the plots of the X-Men movies yet. The idea of mutant registry will probably crop up for the Sokovia Accords.

Steve really would be very well off from the 70 years back pay and all the interest as is required if the government holds private money. That's not even accounting for time-based promotions and the likelihood Steve's cash went into war bonds to keep the PR strong when he was fighting/missing.

I'm aware Darcy is way too uptight there at the end, so is she. Stress can do that to a person and she does try to fix her behavior and relationships. The pattern of apology here used is what I grew up with, and I find it works the best when the situation is not ideal for emotional conversations. They state the apology, the reason they see it as
necessary and request a way to make amends. It may seem clunky, but when you're sleep deprived, angry and terrified, it helps to have that pattern.

Teaser:

“It’s not a world of spies anymore, not even a world of heroes. This is the age of miracles, doctor. And in this big wide world, there’s nothing more horrifying than a miracle. Nothing.”
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

The team and HERO take down Hydra. Helicarriers fall and somewhere a captive has hope.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To quadrad, ValkyriePhoenix, Maedae84, Beth_Mac, Joey99, Selene_Aduial, JER, angelofheaven, Darylslover33, Shadows_of_Shemai, UltraCute, minishadowsoul, Notashamed, SionsnachOiche3, mystormygirl1, Tsita, and the three new kudo-ers.

Additional thanks to those who graciously donated names to the ranks of HERO.

Some lines (a lot of lines) lifted from the movie.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next morning everyone was in a grim mood as they suited up. Darcy pecked Natasha on the cheek as she left beside Clint for their roles. The two women shared the tense awkwardness of feeling things that didn’t quite fit what everyone outside their family would understand.

“Stay safe,” Nat told her.

“Go easy on the leg,” Darcy replied. They both knew the odds of either of those things happening.

The infiltration was almost too easy. Darcy had enough time to hear a prim accusation that Pierce couldn’t control Avenger agents, then she was standing beside Steve as he spoke into the PA system.

“Attention, all SHIELD agents. This is Steve Rogers. You’ve heard a lot about me over the last few days, some of you were even ordered to hunt me down. But I think it’s time you know the truth. SHIELD is not what you thought it was. It never was, it’s had Hydra hidden in it from the start. Alexander Pierce is their leader. The STRIKE and Insight crew are primarily Hydra as well. I don’t know how many more, but I know they’re in the building. They could be standing right next to you.”

Darcy stepped up to speak next. “The good news is that SHIELD has never been what they thought either. And for every monster that crawls up out of a swamp, there are heroes to fight it. Take a good look, Hydra Agents, the person next to you could be ready to burn you. You won’t regrow from that. HERO, it’s time to step up.”

“Be aware,” Steve said calmly. “They almost have what they want; absolute control. They tried to kill Nick Fury and it won’t end there. If good Agents launch those Helicarriers today, Hydra will be able to kill anyone that stands in their way... unless we stop them. I know I’m asking a lot, but the price of freedom is high, it always has been, and it’s a price I’m willing to pay. It’s a price my family
is willing to pay. And if we’re the only ones, then so be it. But I’m willing to bet we’re not.”

“Did you two write that down first, or was it off the top of your heads?” Sam asked.

“Smart-ass,” Darcy snarked at him, getting a grin. “You two go, you’re on Alpha and Bravo, Bucky’s already on route to Charlie. Hill and I will co-ordinate from here.”

They jogged off and Maria set up at a technical looking map of schematics. Darcy ignored that in favor of security cameras and a headset for sound.

She saw Agents rise up in numbers. She saw people still reeling from shock, obviously not HERO recruits, attacking STRIKE teams. She saw a few people she recognized grin bloody smiles and move to fight. Tactical Officer Mae O’Rourke pulled off a stunning Krav Maga maneuver to escape a team before body sliding under one of Clint’s hidden bow stashes to arm up. Seriously not bad for a woman currently on post medical field restriction. Specialist Thompson had gotten… creative, was a word for it… with mechanical pencils down in requisitions. Agent Davenport put her in serious contemplation of how common gamma accidents were when he flipped his fucking lid body-checking someone outside the daycare when they made to enter with a drawn gun. He was definitely berserk-er-ing even if he hadn’t gone green. She made a note to get Samms and Jones transferred more permanently to active field offices after an incident in the staff mini-kitchens interrupted their expat-Welsh tea break. The unorthodox use of cookware was frightening, kettles were not originally meant to do that sort of thing, although she had to applaud the Tangled inspired use of frying pans.

Tearing her eyes off a slightly disturbing altercation in costuming involving Supply Officer Evans, a STRIKE team, a pair of shears, a tomato pin-cushion and a tape measure, she turned her attention to the standoff in the launch room. She liked the tech, he was standing his ground even with Rumlow and Carter squaring off against each other above his head.

“Who’s the guy in the launch room?” she asked Maria.

“Klein, he’s a good guy. We never recruited because he didn’t show much undercover potential.”

“Revise the assessment, he’s got spine, that’s rare. And he’s remaining calm even when scared shitless. I like him, if nothing else you can put him on the approved contacting agent list.”

“I’ll make a note. Falcon, status?”

Natasha smiled cruelly in her disguise as Pierce tried to convince Singh to turn. She could have told him that would never work. Hawley snorted beside her and launched into a spinning kick attack that reminded everyone she had gotten her job on the WSC with experience, not politics. Nat used the confusion to pick Pierce’s pockets and steal his gun, which she pointed at him as she removed the loosened disguise mesh that made her Hawley’s exceptionally plain assistant.

“Sorry,” she said to the Councilwoman as she halted the fight. “Did I step on your moment? I’m rather impatient, I’ll admit.”

“Not at all, dear, not at all,” Hawley reassured. “I was getting bored anyway. Thank you ever so much for this invitation, I’m quite happy I got to stretch out a bit after the plane.”

“Any time, Councilwoman, your work is a privilege to watch.”

She got to work as Hawley held Pierce back.
“What is she doing?” demanded Rockwell angrily.

“She’s disabling security protocols and dumping all the secrets onto the Internet.” Pierce said in a pathetically see through attempt to shift blame.

“Mostly Hydra’s,” she chirped back at him.

“And S.H.I.E.L.D’s. If you do this, none of your past is gonna remain hidden. Not Budapest, not Osaka, not the Children’s Ward. Are you sure you’re ready for the world to see you as you really are?”

Natasha felt the rage building in her. How dare he? He had no clue what happened in any of those places. She paused to look up. “Are you? Are you ready to see me as I really am? Or are you still too interested in the two-dimensional honey-pot ‘sexy spy’ Halloween costume you see when you look at me? I’m ready, and that’s why Insight is coming down.”

“Pretty high opinion of Roger’s chances,” he said, smirking.

“Clearly, you haven’t been paying attention.” She lifted a wrist with a com on it. “Is there anyone we can have send Pierce a message, he’s feeling doubtful.”

“On it,” Darcy said across the PA. “There’s an Agent about to blast a hole in one, he says to tell the Secretary that he indeed is making sure they go up. In flame.”

The explosion rocked the windows. Nat’s eyebrows went up. “That works.”

She watched quietly as Fury faced off with Pierce. It was his fight. He’d never really gotten over the news that his oldest friend, the man he had called his one good eye years before he called Phil that, had quietly slipped into the dark side and never let his friend haul him back. She let the software do its job, then pulled up the wiki-leaks site that the HERO hackers had set up for the sorting and filing of all the unprotected Hydra data she’d pulled. She figured there would be some S.H.I.E.L.D secrets in it, but all the vital ones had gotten a quick script added to them to prevent uploading with Natasha’s plan of attack.

“It’s done. And it’s trending,” she added, impressed.

Pierce was doing something with a trigger when a loud pop sounded, he yelled and grabbed a bleeding hand.

“You should be more careful accepting jewelry,” her Papa said, stepping into the room with a gun and suppressor drawn, as he’d obviously just shot the trigger out of Pierce’s hand.

“Asset, stand down!” ordered Pierce.

“Who the hell is ‘Asset’?” Bucky asked him. “That’s a really dumb name, and I always thought that was a dumb name. At least the Russians were classy. I liked Winter Soldier. It had nice connections for me. But, not what I’m here for. Sweetie, your Ma wants to know what you wanted for dinner after this, Clint looks like he’s going to be too tired to cook, and I don’t blame him. I’m thinking we order Thai from that restaurant Tony likes. Thoughts?”

“Thai sounds good. If Bruce is coming to the party we need to get an order of salad or something, he doesn’t do well with the coconut milk after Hulk comes to play. You realize we now have these things called cell phones, right?”

“Hey, it’s take your father to work day, give me a break. Councilwoman Hawley, pleasure to meet
you ma’am, Talia speaks very highly of you.”

“Talia? And who are you?”

“Oh, sorry, I had my brain washed a while ago and now I just can’t do a thing with it. Sergeant James Barnes of the Howling Commandos, also known as the Winter Soldier, of late from Russia. I try not to think about the intervening time, I had to work for him.”

“The assassin?” shrieked Rockwell.

“Oh, like you never contracted to make someone vanish.” Natasha had to hide a smile. Only her Papa could treat assassination like an extra slice of cake, a minor vice. “Besides, more than half of them are fine, or died of natural causes. Most of my work involved an underground railroad. Oh, that reminds me, sweetie, can you help me remember I need to send Mrs. Stark a gift of some kind, I wound up calling her while I was babysitting. She had great advice. I’d ask Jarvis, but he gets weird about the elder Starks.”

“Sure thing, Dad. Oh,” she gasped, pointing at where the falling carriers were being directed away from the building by a hopping green giant bouncing around and using basic Newtonian physics to shove them with big feet and strong legs.

“Wow, he’s really impressive. I say he gets extra desert.”

“He likes flan,” she said weakly. Hulk was great, but also absolutely terrifying when in his element.

“Good to know.”

Afterward, Tony brought a jet down and collected everyone except Hulk who demanded to go home on his own, and Sam, who wanted to get sleep in his own bed. Hulk actually didn’t want to go anywhere, he was too hyper from the fight. They ended up meeting halfway and had a family picnic in Central Park catered by a few of Tony’s favorite places and five food trucks Clint convinced to come in. The news was exceptionally puzzled by all of it, especially by Bucky’s existence.

“So, we’re left asking ourselves who the newest Avenger is, and how this is all connected to the now infamous ‘SquidGate’ scandal,” a perky but serious junior reporter told her camera. “We’ve received news that a press conference will be held to divulge the changes in the roster and the story behind the mass revelation of hidden neo-nazi elements in almost every level of government, including Senator Stern, more on his involvement at ten.”

Far away, in a cave beneath a church, a girl with jagged edges on her sharp mind smiled eerily at her captors. She was good at listening, even when she shouldn’t be able to hear them. They hated that.

“What are you grinning about?” demanded a doctor passing by her restraints. “Are you spying on people again? You are such a little spy, when we let you be anything.”

She laughed. He flinched at the raw and broken sound that escaped her. She would be put back in the mental cages again soon for this, she didn’t care.

“It’s not a world of spies anymore, not even a world of heroes. This is the age of miracles, doctor. And in this big wide world, there’s nothing more horrifying than a miracle. Nothing. The dead will be buried so deep their own ghosts won’t be able to find them. Then the man who courts Death will find out if she still won’t see him. Ashes, Ashes, we’ll all fall down!”
Translations:
Honey-pot- a spy that uses sex appeal.

Notes:
In the film I was 100% ready for a bad-ass Spy-Mom. Hawley made me happy on many levels, so I'm giving her the badassery she deserved.

The Agent who sends Pierce the message is Warren Peace, the Sky High transplant from earlier.

Bucky is a total Dad-joking dork, fight me.

The line about washing brains is a play on "I washed my hair and now I can't do a thing with it!" which is quote from American author, poet, journalist, and philanthropist Myrtle Reed that later became a slogan and saying. Disney's Snow White, which was out when Bucky fell, used a similar gag about Happy's feet.

Practically every American scandal since the original Watergate has gotten a 'nounGate' name. I'm assuming here that the civilian HERO agents were prepared to frame this as SquidGate, in honor of Darcy's name for Hydra. Senator Stern was the guy in both IM2 and in CA:WS who was in fact a Hydra agent.

Wanda uses lines originally spoken by Strucker, but they fit better this way. Assume she's got very mild Deadpool 4th wall abilities and is making sure the right lines get said. Also, the 'man who courts Death' is Thanos, who really does try to court the personification of Death in the comics, and is behind the Mind Stone being on Earth in the MCU.

Teaser:

"Plus, it’s London, a lot less weird stuff happens in London. Mom’s still upset that Doctor Who lied to her about the number of hot aliens with nice accents who might drop in on her."
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

After a bit too much excitement, the Trio (and Jane) move to London, there are no aliens in London, it should be nice and safe... for now.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest!! To Darylslower33, halfelf87, Beth_Mac, minishadowsoul, Maedae84, mystormygirl1, ValkyriePhoenix, JER, Notashamed, quadrad, tigrislilium, Shadows_of_Shemai, SionnachOiche3, Alex, Joey99, Selene_Aduial, sara47q, Lady_Layla, SerialObssor (DlStar71), PyraSanada, Matilda_Nicki, psyche29, and the ten new kudo-ers!

Some sections in the first third were written by my lovely co-creator ValkyriePhoenix, used with permission.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The excitement caused by the mass revelation of Hydra Agents and HERO finally getting to move on targets that had been too risky finally died down. People adapted to the new terrorist organization the same ways they adapted to all-too-real proof they were not alone in the universe. With a mix of good, bad and frankly disturbing coping skills. Darcy adapted to having Bucky home in a public fashion, and finally got her family calmed down enough to take home. After dropping them off and picking up Maya, (who had been busy, the house had not been blown up, but now a good half of Darcy’s cousins had firearm licenses) she tried to settle back down. This was made less easy by Ciara’s reappearance to retrieve her kids.

"Sirs," Jarvis had intoned warily, "there is a quinjet approaching. I have queried it, but the only answers I get are... best not repeated. Also, Gaelic."

"Might be Ciara," Nat offered.

"Ciara's still radio silent,” Clint pointed out, tossing another dart at the ‘pin the blame on Hydra’ dartboard he’d set up off the training rooms. “And why wouldn't she go to HQ first?"

"Maybe she had some leftover Calamari to deal with?" Darcy suggested.

"Let it land Jarvis, we'll have someone meet...whoever it is," Steve said.

Ten minutes later, irate Gaelic shouting filled the halls, and Clint handed Nat $5 as Ciara stormed in, hauling a large crate and what looked to be a 3-year-old in a deeply hooded coat with a mesh cover over the eyes.

"HERE," Ciara insisted as she shoved the crate at Tony, "Those are for Avengers Eyes Only. I don’t trust what’s left of SHIELD with this. You may want to let Jarvis go through them first. Half
of them are decoys. No viruses, but I doubt you want to personally sort out which ones are encoded episodes of My Little Pony, Doctor Who, and really bad fanfics, and which are real intel, while listening to deliberately annoying music every hard drive plays as long as it is plugged in. Jarvis? I suggest keeping the decoys on hand. You may need the bright colors and physics breaking nonsense after the security footage has been dealt with, it's really not pretty."

"...Ciara," Steve started. "Why are you here, not at HQ, and why do you have a third toddler on your hip?"

"I'm SIX!" the little girl insisted indignantly. "I'm just SHORT."

"The mission was particularly unpleasant, but not something SHIELD needs to be involved in. It's well in hand by others already. I have Little because the ground teams are headed towards action soon and want her safe...er. And I will bludgeon anybody I have to, to make that happen.

Ke'kcharrah, there's sandwiches in the kitchen, thirteen paces left, six paces forward, then four paces right."

"Yes, Ka'al'daahl."

"...paces? Ciara..."

The little girl turned to Steve as he asked and pulled back her hood, showing the scarred cheeks and brow, and milky covered eyes. "I'm blind, idiot," she stated bluntly before turning and huffing directly into the kitchen at the same speed as every other hungry six year old...despite her shorter legs.

"Pretend she's Nat, Steve. She'll be less likely to try to garrote you for being stupid if you do."

"I'm not sure I want to know," Darcy said as the Twins zipped past her to their Mom. "I'm also worried I will have to find out."

"I didn't ask questions about YOUR unplanned adoption slash kidnapping. How are Harley and Zoe?"

"That is a very good point. Carry on."

As Ciara left with her three kids, Darcy looked at Steve, and Jane who had wandered in looking for something to jerry-rig a gadget. "I want a vacation; can we have a vacation?"

"Mom has wanted me to come out and visit since the Battle of New York," Jane offered. "I'm sure she'd want to meet you too. Plus, it's London, a lot less weird stuff happens in London. Mom's still upset that Doctor Who lied to her about the number of hot aliens with nice accents who might drop in on her. A lack of aliens, mutated bad guys, temporally misplaced Nazi's and the related shenanigans would probably be a nice break."

Darcy blinked at her friend. "You and your mom have a lot in common, don't you?"

"Moderately, she's not as interested in science as I could wish." Jane blinked. "Oh you mean being interested in hot aliens. That too. I'm hitting a dead end in my research, though, so I don't want to talk about Thor."

"I'll get us tickets," Steve said as Darcy went to hug Jane. "Jarvis, how do I buy plane tickets?"

<^>
Ian Boothby had worked very hard to get where he was, thank you. He understood all the basic principles of the science he was asked to help with by Miss Lewis. He did not, however, understand some of the methodology employed by Miss Lewis or Doctor Foster. He was happy to be working with one of the brightest minds in astrophysics, especially on the intern stipend provided by Tony Stark, but he really would like to know what she needed a tin colander for.

“Don’t question it, Intern,” instructed Miss Lewis, who had retained her role of keeping Doctor Foster fed, watered, and operating at moderately normal human hours. “Trust me on this. I know you’ll get the Science! part, I hired you based on your fluency in Science! but you won’t necessarily get the logic Jane uses. Jane-Science! is a very particular dialect.”

It should probably worry him that he could tell when his boss was speaking in capitalization and punctuation. That wasn’t at all normal for him.

It didn’t bother him at all.

So he dutifully fetched colanders, coffee and snacks for his bosses. He ran the base data and did all the boring spreadsheet entry parts. He interned the shit out of things, as Miss Lewis would say. He also wound up in an awkward, stuttering-filled friendship with Miss Lewis’s partner. One of them, because at least America had good men who were smart enough to appreciate a woman like Darcy Lewis, and she had two. Bucky Barnes was Ian’s oddly reluctant mechanic friend. They helped build Doctor Foster’s… unique tools.

“What exactly, may I ask, is your problem with lemonade?” Ian finally snapped, as he sifted through the recycle bin for scrap metal in Foster’s mother’s building’s cark-park, a phrase he should never have had to think.

“I like lemonade fine, I also like sodas. I just don’t like that you sell sodas here under the name lemonade. It ain’t lemonade.”

“It is! Fizzy lemonade!”

“Kid, there are three things in lemonade, and none of them should fizz. Water, lemon juice, and sugar. A tiny pinch of salt if you’re fancy, but still, no fizzing. I did not die for fizzing lemon-lime soda being called ‘lemonade’ by the Youth.”

“Oh, come off it, old man. You can pick the next case as long as you stop tossing out cans half-full. It’s sticky and wasteful.”

“I lived through the Great depression and World War Two, I like being wasteful on occasion, it anchors me into the now,” Bucky said carefully. It wasn’t like Ian could remain angry at that, the poor man was just too sad. Did he have to be so reasonable?

“Can you at least dump them down the sink, and not toss the can? I ask, because I think I’ll need you to get some solvent, I have a can stuck to my hand.”

“Aw, shit, Ian I’m sorry. Here, we’ll fix that.”

Not a bad internship, actually, Ian thought as careful metal fingers wiped a wet rag over the worst of the goop glueing his palm to a half dead Ribena.

<<^>>

Eric was very glad he had decided to take leave of his senses prior to meeting Darcy’s new beaus. Mainly because then he didn’t have to blame her romantic life for his insanity. Of course, the way
they acted around her made so much of the prickly, sassy, mercurial girl he knew make sense. He
couldn’t for the life of him figure out how he missed it.

Well, the fact that time travel and body switching were facets of crazy science fiction nonsense could
have helped.

Never the less, Captain America was much more accommodating of his situation than most.

“No, I get it,” Rogers defended to a hysterical Darcy. “Pants can be very uncomfortable, especially
tight ones. If it weren’t for the advances in sweat-pants manufacturing, I would probably be in the
same boat as Eric right now. I hate kahkis with a passion, and that’s because they remind me of
what we used to wear and it’s horrible.”

“He can wear or not wear whatever, Steve, as long as I never have to see him not wearing it!”

“I can’t think when I’m wearing those leg traps!”

“Can we compromise, please?” Captain Rogers begged. “Kilts! Eric, would you wear a kilt?”

“Maybe,” Eric allowed.

“Fantastic, I’m calling Ciara. Darcy, look at a wall or something while I get instructions on how
to… oh, hi Agent Harrow, I was wondering, can you give me instructions on how to wrap a kilt?
No, it’s for a friend. NO! It’s not for… Ciara, stop cackling, you are never getting a picture of me in
a kilt, let alone ‘all greased up and shiny’ for the love of… Ciara I’m in a very happy relationship!
It’s for Selvig, he’s on a pants strike. Yes, ‘oh’ is right. Uh huh, ok, how long you said? Thank
you.”

“Your friend get a bit over-friendly?” Eric asked.

“She’s incorrigible. We already knew that though, she wouldn’t be Ciara if she were corrigible. She
says we’ll need five yards of 60-inch-wide fabric and we better not use a family tartan or anything
with too much red. I think that’s a personal thing, though, she was swearing about an undercover
job.”

“Huh,” Darcy said, looking resolutely at her phone. “Did you know the primary color in McBain’s
tartan is red? There’s some green and white, too, it’s kind of Christmassy, but the main color is red.
I think Bucky was right that they hooked up when she was on a job. And now she has kids… oh
man. That’s got to be awkward as all fuck… what with SquidGate and all.”

“No,” Eric and Steve chorused together. Eric shot the Captain a look and continued. “Darcy, no
match-making, you know it annoys people. If they are meant to be together, if they both want to be
together, they will figure it out. Nazi’s or no Nazi’s people have always been figuring each other out
and learning to do what it takes to be happy.”

“But…” Darcy trailed off as Eric waved a pair of shorts in her line of sight.

“I will put these on while we find fabric, if you agree not to meddle in this woman’s love life.”

“Fine, but I’m going on record; I think if I got her happily hooked up with her baby daddy she
wouldn’t angle for sexy pics of Steve as often.”

“Oh Darcy,” Lydia Foster sighed as she walked in the door. “Of course she would. I want to angle
for sexy pictures of Steven, and I’m old enough to be his mother. Well, not his mother exactly, but a
man of his experienced years. I was happily married for many years, and I don’t want a new
relationship. But the only reasons a woman has for not wanting sexy pictures of him are death, and complete homosexuality. Or simply not liking the human form in the sexual sense, although I think in that case, it would be more of an artistic choice than anything, since Steven is so obviously in love with you. Accept that you hitched yourself to two prime cuts of grade A all-American beef and we will all be ogling them.”

“Well, I suppose that is the kind of problem to have,” Darcy allowed. “Can we borrow your car, the rental is going to kill Steve’s legs if we try to shove Eric in. Why did I agree to a sub-compact?”

“Because you’ve never been in a British sub-compact. Here are the keys, do not ding it.”

“I’ve got this, Lydia,” Eric said quickly. “Your insurance doesn’t cover acts of adopted gods.”

“I resent that. I can’t deny that, but I resent it, all the same. For this, I will buy you the most offensive plaid available to make into a kilt.”

“If it’s that bad, he won’t wear it,” Steve pointed out as they got on the elevator.

“Oh, all right. Not the Buchanan variant that’s all orangey yellow then. But there will be revenge.”

Eric was almost happy to hear that. He’d worried about Darcy’s quietness when he first met her, how it could slip away easily as she found something that made her smile and laugh, only to come crashing down like a wave later. She’d seemed so lost as an intern, it only got more worrying when he took the job at S.H.I.E.L.D. and she started having him relay messages for her. But she had become centered since then, more at home in her body and life. He was glad, because as much as he tried to think of Jane as a surrogate child, on behalf of her father, Darcy was a part of that. The friends were so close as to be sisters, and Eric couldn’t think of one with a paternal feeling without loving the other the same way.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Ke'kcharrah/Ka'al'daahl: words from ValkyriePhoenix denoting Ciara and her new ward. Bug VP about those.
Half dead- half empty and discarded.
Ribena- a drink sold in Britain that tastes like black currents. Tasty, and sadly not widely sold in America.
Beaus- older-sounding word for boyfriends.
Family tartan- a specific pattern of plaid only used by/for one of the Clans of Scotland.

Notes:
I used large chunks of ValkyriePhoenix's writing in this chapter, but any mistakes are mine. I like the shared sandbox aspect of Ciara and company, but I respect that the writing is a joint-ish effort in the return of Ciara scene.

Plane travel was a luxury in Steve's day, aside from military action and Tony's private jet once, Steve hasn't flown. Hence asking Jarvis instead of going right for Southwest Airline's website.

This fic has Good-Guy!Ian, as was requested. He's fond of Darcy and probably would not complain if she did kiss him as happened in canon, but he's respectful of her current
romantic choices and just very glad someone had the sense to date her. Despair over the stupidity of men who don't like lovely women is a trait common to most of my best guy friends, and where I'm getting Ian's salt from.

In America, lemonade is a specific flat beverage made of lemon juice, water, and sugar. It does not fizz. In Britain and many other countries, 'lemonade' is a whole class of carbonated lemon flavored drinks that Americans call 'lemon-lime sodas' and this has lead to the existence of a lemonade discourse. With Bucky's existing cognitive difficulty, getting what he expects is a big deal for his stability, hence tossing out mostly full cans of something that wasn't what he thought it was.

Some people came out of the Depression and War rationing experience wanting to hoard food or refuse to waste. Steve reacts that way. Some people came out reveling in the decadence of not saving leftovers and being able to toss a partly empty can. Bucky reacts that way. Both are healthy reactions to a history of scarcity if not taken too far. EDITED TO ADD: Ribena is not lemonade, the lemonade(lemon soda) was tossed out after one sip, the Ribena was drunk down to half a can, forgotten, and tossed for safety reasons due to Bucky not knowing when he set it down.

Naked Selvig showed up in canon, and I loved it. I have never related to Selvig more than when he declared pants made it hard to think. Kilts immediately hit me as a good middle ground, and Steve's seen too many soldiers in the buff to be phased, so I had him doing my speaking.

Ciara Harrow left the undercover mission with Clan McBain pregnant and hating red plaids. See more in Code Chartreuse.

Family tartans and the use of them by outsiders is a matter of spotty opinion. Some think you shouldn't ever wear a family tartan that isn't yours, as it is disrespectful, and others think it doesn't matter anymore because of the loss of most of the ancestral tartan patterns after Culloden. To be safe, I recommend not wearing a kilt of a family tartan lest you offend.

McBain Clan and Buchanan Variant tartans can be found here: https://www.tartanregister.gov.uk/

British subcompacts are MUCH smaller than their American manufactured counterparts. It's hard to navigate in a car that tiny on streets that flow opposite what you're used to, hence the Terrible American Driver joke inherent in the scene where Darcy drives in the movie. For those wondering about the "acts of adopted gods" line, Darcy has been adopted by both Thor and Loki as a sister, and the old insurance disclaimer about 'acts of god' was too apropos not to fit in.

Teaser:

“You speak in riddles, my son.”
“I can be cryptic or I can lie, Mother, I have been too injured to do more.”
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

The trio settle into England, life continues and nobody thinks anything is on the horizon for once.

Loki speaks with his mother and tries to open a communication line.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Maedae84, halfelf87, sara47q, quadrad, ValkyriePhoenix, Darylslower33, Beth_Mac, Notashamed, FantasyTLOU, mystormygirl1, Matlida_Nicki, angelofheaven, casedeputy, Selene_Aduial, SionnachOiche3, Mimi_Sardinia, Joey99, hafizatulsufiahyaacob, Shadows_of_Shemai, Tsita, psyche29 and the 8 new kudoers.

My school schedule is hitting me hard, I ended up in two for-all-intents-and-purposes Writing Intensive courses and am using my daily allotment of written words that come out on school stuff rather than fan stuff. I'll try to get at least two new chapters a week out, but I can make no promises.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


“What!” her boss yelled.

“Cute Office Guy showed up with flowers, boss lady. Are we at home?”

“Oh dear lord.” Jane said, blanching in panic. It wasn’t a surprise to Darcy, she knew how to hear what wasn’t being said, and control what she wasn’t saying. Jane… not so much. It kind of went hand in hand with not knowing when to eat.

“Janey-pie, when a nice boy of reasonable levels of attractiveness flirts with a nice girl who at the time had only one stain on her tee shirt, he usually doesn’t really mean he’s too busy for dating. He means “I’m too busy to waste time on a girl who isn’t worth it, but you are worth it” and he thinks you mean the same when you agree. He likes you and wants to go out with you, and thinks you want the same thing.”

“But I don’t!” Jane wailed. “I want to get the CR emissions detector working! And take another set of blue shift measures! And run another batch of the radio-telescope filter data through the calculation program in New York, which means waiting for a good time for Jarvis including time zone calculations. I have work!”

“Ok,” Darcy said calmly, helping model the right breathing for Jane before the tiny genius could pass
out from stress. “I’m hearing “I don’t want this. Make it go away.” Is that what I should be doing, or do you want to try explaining it to him yourself?”

“No, no. I’m an adult,” Jane insisted, like she was trying to convince herself. She ran nervous hands down her faded jeans. “I can turn a man down for a date. I did that all the time in school. Turning men down is a thing I can do, right? Right.”

Before Darcy could stop her, she marched out of the room and presumably down to the front door where Cute Office Guy was in a polite face off with the door man. Thankfully, Tony had given her remote security upgrade kits for every building Jane used in England, and she had a good camera view of the interaction on her phone. When Jane came down, the camera was looking dead at her tee shirt that had a hole in it.

“Oh Jane,” Darcy sighed.

“What about Doctor Foster?” her intern, Ian, asked as he came in from the roof. He was carrying a notebook and a thermos and she made a mental note to be sure he went to an actual bed in some reasonable time frame if he wasn’t working with Jane after dark. The Tony-sponsored equipment was the best Science! toy in the sandbox, if she was going off no other input than ‘Tony made it’ but she couldn’t have an intern asleep on the job because of playing with the big kid toys. At least now she had the chance to force him to function, impressing the importance of getting rest when you can.

“Watch, Grasshopper, and you’ll learn the eternal mystery of Jane,” Darcy intoned. “She’s going to come in that door utterly confused as to why any man wants to date her ever, and you will find yourself wanting to agree, but also wanting to argue. It’s her way.”

“I don’t really care who she dates,” Ian said cautiously. “Unless it will impact work. I suppose the last date she had impacted work… but it was sort of incidental according to Doctor Selvig.”

“And yet… Just watch, man.”

Ian grunted in a way that might have been cute if she were into that, but she’d always been drawn to Steve’s fire and Bucky’s bedrock before she ever considered someone in the Monty emotional weight class, and Ian was something between Monty and Dugan. Maybe a touch of Jones’ brain, but the boy was not built or made of rage and hope. He was a quieter type and she could see hooking him up with any number of people, but he didn’t tick her own boxes. She was reasonably sure that she didn’t really tick his, either, which was nice. Guy friends that weren’t looking for stuff with her were nice.

Her contemplation of what Ian might want in a significant other was cut short by Jane coming back in. Darcy prepared to juggle her friend’s emotions until they settled.

“So how went the shooing away of Cute Office Guy?”

“I have a date.”

“Now Jane you know that… wait. What?”

“I’m bad at people, I went down there to tell him I have no time or interest in dating now, and then there was a date planned. In a week. The restaurant is nice sounding. Why is this my life?”

Darcy face-palmed and Ian promptly died laughing.

<^>
In Asgard, another boy was laughing.

He laughed more than many would suspect given the situation, actually. Loki had reluctantly accepted gifts from people outside his Mother, relayed through her and confirmed safe. He’d expected token efforts from Thor’s friends, but that’s not what he got. Sif had proven a deft hand at picking the better tales from her time off world, and Volstagg had a hidden gift of drawing that had been pressed to the service of illustration for the stories transcribed in Hogun’s neat and steady hand. Fandral had a clear say in the reading chair that had been sent down, only the self-avowed hedonist would send a prisoner something so… plush. Another might have picked the bed for comfort, but only Fandral would have added a recreational luxury. It warmed parts of Loki’s heart he hadn’t known had grown cold, that people who had once opposed him, and for good reasons, would spare a thought for his well-being.

But he wasn’t laughing at the book of stories, this time. He was laughing at a story told by voice, falling from an illusionary set of lips. His mother had come to visit.

“My son, you do truly remind me of the boy I loved so dearly back then. I had thought you lost,” Frigga said gently. He knew she hated to remind him of his fall, both from grace and the Bifrost. “Tell me truthfully, what returned your light to you? What brought my baby boy home?”

Loki paused. He trusted Frigga, he did. But he did not trust Odin to keep out of business that was not his. Should the All-Father learn of Darcy…. Of course, Hiemdal could have told him at any time he cared to ask. He gathered his courage, bit his lip in a slight self-centering habit, and spoke.

“I have found a sister of my soul, Mother. She is… light and dark, raging fire and strength, but also silence and shadow and a whisper on the night air that calls to the hidden souls of Midgardians. My Shadow Sister helped to free me from what brought me lowest, then lifted me higher still. She cared for wounds none see, for she too feels them. I owe her what soul I still have.”

“You speak in riddles, my son.”

“I can be cryptic or I can lie, Mother, I have been too injured to do more,” he scolded his mother. Frowning at her image, suddenly he became aware of how Darcy felt when she became howling winds and the danger of a stormy sea. He’d wondered how she did that as Thor would, and later did the quiet parts like he himself would. But his sister was not the only creature of duality in the family it would seem. “I’m sorry, Mother. I am, truly. But my fears give strength to the lock upon the truth within me. I cannot. Ask Thor if you must, tell him I will not hold what he says in accounts against him, unless he insults her, in which case I shall break free to smack his head in a corrective manner. I learned well from our friends, and our found families.”

Queen Frigga laughed. “Oh my son, it does me good to see this renewed brotherhood. I shall ask Thor, when next I have a chance. He is gone so often these days. He is required on the battlefield as the Nine Realms are brought to peace. Although I must say he has gotten better at talking before hitting.”

“That too, is a side effect of time near my Shadow Sister. She improves things, it’s who she is. Have you yet found a way to relay messages to Midgard?”

“Perhaps,” Frigga allowed. “It will be difficult, without the All Father’s help. But I believe it can be done if you have a good focus item.”

“I have a burner phone,” Loki said. “It’s a bit like a communication rune stone, but made for seiderless Midgardian hands and reusable. I press buttons, but I do not crush it.”
“That’s… surprisingly sensible. Very well, I shall walk you through the far-speaking spell. It may take several tries, though. It is strong magic, and not easily tamed to a single user’s will.”

“I believe I may yet become patient, Mother,” Loki replied, settling down by the brazier and pulling the small black brick out of the seidr ‘pocket’ he stored it in. Even if this took years, he would master it. He didn’t have much else to do.

<^>

Bucky had very few memories of England. Most were dark, with the sun down and rain clouds over head, hiding from falling bombs. He remembered the balloons overhead, and the tight, stubborn fear on people’s faces. This England wasn’t that England. This England had lights, everywhere, it had people who showed every emotion on the spectrum. This England had great things.

This England also had loud mouth assholes.

In earlier, happier days, he would have just punched the guy on the street harassing Darcy in the face and called it good. He had gotten more nuanced though, and when she smiled that thin, slit-throat grin, he backed off. He went back inside as the man yelled about space invaders and humanity’s manifest destiny. He changed into his war-rig as the man slandered Thor and questioned the right of mutants to live. He hopped up onto the rail of the tiny balcony overlooking the street where the guy shouted his hatred of foreigners, queers, liberals and something called the European Union. Then he dropped three stories to dent the sidewalk as he hit in a three-point landing, both feet and his metal left arm.

“No, really,” he said to the silent, shocked man whose face had gained that old numb-dead-shock-fear look from the days of blackout curtains and firelight from shelled buildings. “Keep talking. I’m American, we like free speech. Free speech and punching Nazi’s; it’s like baseball, Ma, and apple pie. My boyfriend will be so proud.”

“You’re evil, keep it up,” remarked Lydia Foster when he came back in the front door.

“I intend to, Ma’am. It seems a shame to stop just when I’ve gotten so good at it. Do you know where Darcy is?”

“She just got done making popcorn, I think she took her phone into the den to re-watch the security footage. I told her to take the cackling in another room, I need to make a few calls before going to help Anette get into her new flat.”

Bucky smiled.

“That’s my girl. Be back in a bit and I can help your friend move that sofa, Ms. Lydia.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
Dating can be insanely awkward for people on the Autism Spectrum, as Bodies-verse Jane is. I'm basing both what Darcy thinks will happen and what actually happens off myself and my friends on the Spectrum. We do sometimes end up agreeing to go on a date when we might not really want to, as well as get awkward about why anyone would even want to, because socially it is very hard to know what to do one way or
another.

Darcy is using echoing, or mirroring, a useful skill for communicating with young kids, old people, and those with socially affecting neuro-divergence. Look it up, it's good stuff.

Ask me questions about my Darcy Emotional Attraction headcanons!

In Bodies-verse, Thor went home loudly advocating for Loki and so even though Loki is shit at standing up for himself (hence prison, even if Odin had any common sense or rationality Loki wouldn't have made good arguments on his own behalf in the private court session) Thor's friends are now pro-Loki recovering. Fandral is the Asgard equivalent of Tony Stark and very invested in creature comforts.

Loki is a momma's boy, that's canon. The burner phone is the one the Twins gave him and has Darcy's number in it, he just has to construct a magical by-pass for being half a galaxy or so out of cell range.

Current politics have been getting to me, so I'm venting. I know I'm not 100% to date on modern British political mores, and I have been informed I have mixed-up facts, so I'll just say this guy would have voted for the Yam had he been an American. I'm hoping I caught all the American-isms and got them out, my apologies to Britain is I got the details of hyper-conservative loud-mouth assholes on that side of the pond wrong.

Teaser

They understandably didn’t want to get the story from the metal armed ex assassin, or the short-tempered beauty who threatened to tase them if they didn’t bring Jane back.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Jane goes on a date, encounters a wild Aether, and sees Thor again.

Darcy is just trying to keep up, and very sure this isn't actually her job.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To DarylSlover33, Shadows_of_Shemai, ananova, Maedae84, Jade01, quadrad, JER, angelofheaven, SionnachOiche3, ValkyriePhoenix, Selene_Aduial, Joey99, Notashamed, rosiedeplume, Beth_Mac, Vaughn_Tyler, mystormygirl1 and the 17 new kudo-ers.

As always when we enter a canon section, some lines may be lifted from the movies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy was regretting her life choices. It had made sense to make Jane go on the date, awkward turtle though her friend was, canceling it (again, as Jane had managed to find a rare astronomical event in the night sky of Zambia that required her to be on the phone with astronomers in Lusaka when Cute Office Guy showed up) would only prolong the situation. Richard was a nice guy, but just about as clueless at social things as Jane, and wasn’t going to think polite excuses were anything but polite excuses. Some men needed a firm ‘no I’m dating a God’ or concrete proof it wasn’t working. Jane was refusing to do the first, so Darcy insisted she at least try the second.

That should have been fine.

That was very not fine.

To be fair, Darcy hadn’t known she had gotten ‘known’ among the kids who wandered around outside together as the assistant crazy science lady, or that they would interrupt her coffee run to ask about science stuff. She had no reason whatsoever to think for a minute that they’d found a secret hideout location that ignored certain natural laws. Darcy may not have been as into hard science as she was into social sciences, but she knew some. She really knew gravity. It was a know thy enemy thing for her. She knew gravity didn’t just decide not to affect a thing. The scanning device she was carrying also worried her. The numbers weren’t her strong suit, but she had a great ear for tones and the beeping was the same as at Puente Antiguo two years ago, and the departure of her brothers a little less than a year ago.

Which was why she was evading the maître-de at the nice restaurant to get the scan to her boss. And learning that maybe ‘clueless’ didn’t cover Richard. Can he get some wine? Seriously? She wasn’t even wearing a uniform. She had on a beanie. The hell? Fortunately, her sass remained with her as she handed Jane the beeping device.

“It’s malfunctioning,” Jane insisted.
“That’s what I said!” Darcy agreed enthusiastically. Jane whacked the gadget on the white covered table. “That’s what I did! But you just hit a little more scientifically. What’s going on?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Jane said hesitantly, shooting a look at her date.

“Yeah,” he said and gave Darcy a look. She was rapidly revising her opinion downward.

“It didn’t look like nothing. Kind of looks like the readings that Erik was rambling about,” she said to him. “Our friend, Doctor Eric Selvig, he built a functional space portal and it drove him a little banana-balls. He’s smart though, really smart.”

“He’s not interested,” Jane told her, glancing at her date. “I’m not interested. Time for you to go now.”

“Okay,” Darcy said amiably. “Intern Ian and I can cover the temporary breakage of natural laws. You have a nice date.”

Downstairs, Darcy refreshed her lipstick while Ian fretted.

“But we need Doctor Foster. She actually knows what these things do! I don’t, you don’t, and Eric went to Stonehenge last week and hasn’t phoned back.”

“Relax, Intern. Three… Two… One…” Darcy paused and listened for footsteps, raising a single finger in teacher mode when she heard Jane’s gait.

“I hate you.” Jane was trying to scowl but her eyes gave it away, she was happy to be on the chase. Darcy smiled at her.

“No you don’t Jane, get in the car. Intern can drive us.”

“You know,” Ian said reasonably, ”just because your fine gentlemen asked me not to give you the keys is no reason to act like you don’t know my first name.”

“Shut up and drive.”

<^>

Jane Foster had not gotten where she was by being dumb. Ok, maybe specifically following three kids into an abandoned warehouse was actually a result of being dumb, but she trusted Darcy. If her opinion was that the kids were onto something, Jane would listen. Listen and make sarcastic comments.

Once the kids were reassured she was the ‘Scientist Lady’ and that Darcy and Ian knew her, they showed her the floating truck and the teleporting loop. The readings were fascinating, it was almost like the Bifrost was all around her, filling the walls and saturating the air with cosmic rays and quantum particles. She followed them carefully, mapping the route she took on the built-in GPS so she didn’t have to remember to count steps on a map. Without warning, she realized Darcy was no longer beside her, and she had the strangest sense of vertigo. Gravity dropped out from under her feet and slammed her towards a wall. Jane screamed and threw up her hands to block the onrushing bricks, but they never hit. Instead, she had the strong impression of dark, fractal light bouncing off mirrors and then she was standing on a stone bridge looking at a large box.

“Ok, Jane, you can do this,” she said into the void around the bridge. “Darcy taught you how to find your strength, you know you have it. You are not weak, you are not afraid. You regularly elbowed the Norse God of Thunder in the ribs to get him to stop hogging the snack foods. Now, what do you
Jane sighed. The Void was not particularly insightful. “I’ll tell you what you do; you science the shit out of things. You are Doctor Jane Foster and no mystery will scare you.”

Pulling her phone free of her coat pocket, Jane flipped on the recording app and circled in place, catching every inch she could see. Then she took a step forward and did it again. As Darcy liked to say, it’s not science unless you write it down. Which was massively over simplifying the matter, but Darcy wasn’t a hard science major, so Jane was just happy she did appreciate the need for recording data. She documented every inch of the walls from every reasonable angle to attempt before trying to cover the box. It seemed the most likely source of danger. After circling that, recording app doing its best, she switched to a notation app and started dictating the range of energy fluctuations based on relative position of the meter.

It wasn’t too interesting, but her job had lots of boring data collection before she ever got to do the fun stuff. That’s astrophysics for you; boring right up until the words ‘super-massive black hole’ got said.

She was trying to measure the difference in power based on how close the meter got when a line of black-red anti-light snaked out to grab her wrist. It was cold and hot and thrust her into a weightless void of shifting and increasingly chaotic patterns. Her mind almost made sense of the order but the math was simply too big for her skull. Her breath stopped and a part of her knew that was bad, but all she could do was try to trace patterns out of chaos. Chaos, chaos, chaos theory, string theory, quantum enmeshment, the laws of thermodynamics…

*Come on Jane, you can do this,* she thought to herself, prompting waves of thoughts that came from elsewhere.

*Who are you kidding Jane, this is impossible.*

*Possible or not, isn’t it easier to let go?*

“**NO!”** Jane yelled at the voices-thoughts-lies. “I am Seidkonur Jane Foster, I watch the stars and dream the impossible dream. I do what is difficult, what may be impossible. I break physics for fun. And you will not break me.”

*But when the moon submerges in the ocean and the diamond stars are set in silver, what does the similarity of ravens and writing desks even mean?*

*Oh don’t be foolish, there’s a b in both.*

*Alice got lost, and I guess that we really can’t blame her.*

*But you’re not an Alice, you are a Jane, but you’re not a Jain, so does that matter?*

*I hear they say she got tangled and tied in the lies that became her.*

*No, no, no! They say she went mad!*

*Oh I don’t know that she did, she seems rather calm.*

*She’s just waiting. She’s furious.*

*But she never complained.*
Well you know, there's peace of a kind in a life... what's the word? Means crazy. Oh, yeah, unconstrained.

Poor Jane won’t you ever come out and play?

Release the coat-tails of impossible things, come float and be easy.

Relax and be merry, unless you’d rather be Mary or married.

“NO. No, you don’t get to break me. Throw the impossible at me, I don’t care. I welcome it. The difficult I can do right away, the impossible takes a minute. The Planck constant, denoted as '\( h \)', is a physical constant that is the quantum of action, central in quantum mechanics. E equals h times f. A quantum is the minimum amount of any physical entity involved in an interaction. In quantum field theory, quantum mechanical interactions among particles are described by interaction terms among the corresponding underlying quantum fields. Mass is particles, but is also a wave. Do you even know how broken a brain has to be to make that possible to understand? I don’t do relaxed anymore. I am Jane Foster!”

Very well. We shall speak again, Jane Foster.

She came to in the hall of the factory, somewhat convinced she just won a fight. Her nerves were thrumming and her head hurt. She had to find Darcy, that whole thing was... was... what was she thinking about? She had to find Darcy.

<^>

Bucky was holding Darcy while Steve talked to the police. They understandably didn’t want to get the story from the metal armed ex assassin, or the short-tempered beauty who threatened to tase them if they didn’t bring Jane back. She was shaking in his arms with either anger or silent tears. The clouds had darkened since Darcy called them to come out and help her five hours ago. The cops had been there three.

Darcy stiffened and Bucky turned to see Doctor Foster storming out of the building. He blinked twice to clear the faint aura of red-black menace that traced illusory lines around her. He stayed beside Darcy as she went to confront her boss over the missing time and defend her choice to call the authorities.

Rain broke the conversation, and Bucky pulled out the little folding umbrella he had started carrying two weeks into their London stay. Jane blinked and started walking away, leaving Darcy to grumble what sounded like ‘typical’ as the gap of empty sky followed her boss.

“Come on, handsome,” she said to him. “I want to make sure my brothers are okay.”

“You’re the boss, Doll.”

Jane had slapped Thor once, then hugged him, when Darcy got in range to yell at them. Thor stopped the rain for her and let Darcy scold him for not calling over the time away.

“Uh… we’re kind of in the middle of something,” Jane said pointedly.

“Um… I’m pretty sure we are getting arrested,” Darcy countered. “Unless Steve diverts them, but the Star Spangled Man With A Plan doesn’t have as much effect on this side of the Atlantic as one could wish. What we need is a guy in a Union Jack to come by and vouch for us. Alternately, can you plead us out on diplomatic immunity, Thor?”
“Asgard has no current treaty with any land on Midgard,” Thor said regretfully.

“Hold that thought,” Jane said with frustration, marching off to where the police vehicles were parked.

“So… how’s space?” Darcy asked her brother.

“Space is fine. How are the Avengers?”

“They’re good. Pepper joined the team, she’s working with Tony on training space in the tower, since she got a set of powers that can blow stuff up and melt metal. We asked the kiddo’s teachers to do weekend power-control classes. Oh, yeah, the team adopted some kids. They’re sweet, I’m glad we got them away from their abuser and into decent education.”

“That’s… a lot.”

“You were gone for a while. Midgard ain’t kidding around here, big guy. How’s Loki?” She said it casually, but Bucky could see the rebar tension along her spine.

“Our brother fares… as well as he may, according to Mother. He’s still on restricted access, and we haven’t yet gotten the All Father to rethink imprisonment. We smuggle in what comforts we may.”

“What.” Darcy’s face was flat and dangerous. Bucky couldn’t honestly say his own was different.

“Loki’s been locked up?” he asked, low and menacing. Years of captivity and killing and striking fear at a command had given him a long list of threatening gestures, but nothing stood up to the perfect stillness that caught him in his moments of pure rage.

“Sadly, yes. He was tried privately, and I’m sure did not defend himself as well as he could. He yet suffers guilt in his heart that reframes his responses to queries in ways that do not best endorse him. However… the court of public opinion has spoken in his favor. I doubt the All Father knows why he has not been successful in battle since, but an army’s morale is fragile indeed, when they mis-like a leader’s choices.”

“You sly fuck,” Darcy said approvingly. Bucky smiled and a loud boom came from the area where Jane and Steve had been talking to the police.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Crazy science lady- like crazy cat lady only Jane has Science! not cats.
Cosmic rays and quantum particles- things mentioned in Marvel comics as sources of super powers.
Chaos theory, string theory, quantum enmeshment, the laws of thermodynamics- elements of physics that all contain attempts to make the intensely non-understandable into something quantifiable or at least somewhat graspable by the human mind.

Notes:
So for starters, I never once understood how Richard could see Darcy in that outfit and think she was wait-staff. I could see the Nice!Richard read, but that's not what worked in a Darcy POV, I'm sorry.
Ian shows considerably more backbone in this fic, as anyone subjected to daily doses of time-displaced super soldiers would have to for self preservation. Also I love the super passive aggressive fuck yous that are so distinctly UK.

I couldn't believe Jane's first instinct wasn't to record literally everything. This is me fixing canon with her recording app, which she so definitely has. Even if she can't figure out how to change a ring tone, she can press buttons to turn on and use an app.

"It's not science unless you write it down" is a phrase from the show Mythbusters, also known as the best practical physics primer if you have to work with Jane's style of mechanics. Blowing things up is fun, blowing things up scientifically results in fewer trips to the ER.

Super massive black holes are fun, and by fun I mean the alterations to how things like gravity work near them break people's minds. Astrophysics is a lot of really dull math and counting things... until it isn't and you're desperately trying to hold onto your SAN points.

I tried really hard to keep the science sort of reasonable, but it may break down in some places.

Jane's conversation with the Aether follows the ride-along break down, italics are thoughts that count as communication, and quotes indicate speaking.

The Aether references several works of Absurdist literature including Lewis Carol's Alice books, although some lines were lifted from Seanan Mcguire's song Wicked Girls. This is because when imagining the Anti-Jane to form the core Aether personality, I went from 'Scientist' to 'Artist' and from 'Logical' to 'Absurdist'. The idea there being that to destroy everything, including light, the Aether has to be anti-everything, not just anti-matter. Since it's sentient, sorta, that means flexible core personality to oppose the host.

The Aether is also a plural network, much like Bruce-and-Hulk, capable of speaking among themselves. I have headcanons, ask me of them.

Jane uses math and science to force the chaotic thing to make sense. This is what she always does, even in canon. As in canon, she forgets the experience to protect herself.

Darcy's reaction is to seek help when she loses Jane, but in this canon, she calls her men first off, before calling the authorities, because she knows how Jane will react to losing the site, and wants to at least try to find her with some back up that isn't cops first.

Teaser:

In retrospect, probably not the most diplomatic thing to say upon first entering a sovereign kingdom, but in her defense, Bifrost travel would take getting used to.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Jane meets the Aether properly, and goes to Asgard for a check-up.

Darcy deals with two realms worth of protectors, sees Asgard and begins her 'Annoying Odin' campaign.

Steve learns more about Asgard, watches his Angel rip into a god, and is impressed with Jane.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Jade01, UltraCute, hafizatulsufiahyaacob, Beth_Mac, Dances_With_Vulcans, Maedae84, Tsita, halfelf87, Shadows_of_Shemai, Joey99, quadrad, Kyla, ValkyriePhoenix, SionnachOiche3, JER, angelofheaven, rosiedeplume, Selene_Aduial, Matlida_Nicki, ClockWeasel, psyche29, sara47q and all seven new kudo-ers.

Quick warning, there is no teaser and I'm going on hiatus. There have been health concerns come up, and I need to focus on taking care of that, which also sometimes means not writing. If you want more info, ask in the comments, I'm not shy about that, and I don't want folks worrying unduly when I don't update next week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jane had been fighting to stay focused with the whispers of chaos in her mind. But when the officer grabbed at her the chaos surged like an unprotected power line that had been hit by lightning. She saw the wave of black-red cover the world and then she fell unconscious into the twisty, confusing realm it came from.

You're not going anywhere

You're ours now.

“No! I belong to myself, not to you, whatever you are. I am Jane Foster, and I will not let you take that from me,” she said, suddenly aware her self, he body, was an illusion in this place, a floating, flickering hologram of self-knowledge constructed by her mind.

What makes you think this isn’t you, Jane Foster?

“What?”

What makes you think this isn’t all in your head?
You have been called crazy, you know.

Of course she knows, she’s us!

Ugh, we are running out of Time.

Running out of patience, too.

“I know I’m not you. I know that the same way I knew Einstein-Rosen bridges could happen, the same way I learned to quantify radiation from sources you’d have to be crazy to believe in. Because I believe in science and its ability to measure and explain what seems impossible.”

She paused in the weird void’s echo-chamber, waiting for the voices to contradict her. They seemed very invested in contradiction and confusion and she really had to try to remember this place to talk about with Darcy. She couldn’t believe she’d forgotten it. She tried to trace the pattern of fluid dynamics that may or may not govern the red pulses, and realized she’d spoken to voices in her head.

“Or, you know, I might be crazy, talking to you, but I also don’t care if I am. I might be crazy because of how much I believe in what I do, but I never cared before, and I don’t care now. Real or not, you can’t stop me by trying to drive me insane, or making me doubt myself.”

The twitching energy under her illusion skin prickled harder, tiny crimson sparks darting along veins she shouldn’t be able to see. Jane narrowed her eyes at the empty nothingness that floated before her.

“No you don’t. I’m already nuts, fine, I dealt with that. I got used to everyone doubting me and I’m still usually right.” Jane paused in the unnatural silence. “What did you mean, running out of time?”

The Convergence is coming.

“What’s that? Why aren’t you explaining anything? I can’t do whatever it is you want of me if I don’t know what that is.”

We are weighing.

It could be risky.

It could kill our host.

Shoulda been a solid.

Shut it. We tell her.

All around Jane the dark pulsing lights flickered and shifted, condensing and coalescing and fragmenting. She got the disconcerting impression of a million voices screaming over each other with messages that scrambled and scrabbled and fought until none of them made it to her in a coherent form, and yet, she felt if she were ever asked a direct question about it, she’d answer accurately. She also felt that she wouldn’t remember to ask anyone to ask her, and she fell unconscious. Again. Her last thought was how unfair that was.

<^>

When Darcy had raced to Jane, she hadn’t thought about the cops. Maybe she should have, given they were posing a distinct threat now, but her mind had been on getting to her friend and not letting her get hurt. She was checking Jane’s vitals as best she could with cold numbed fingers, which freed up her men and Thor to forcefully explain Jane’s illness and how it shouldn’t have an impact on her
rights. She caught Ian’s eye and mouthed the word ‘leave’ at him until he ducked out. Ian would get the story back to Eric and Jane’s Mom. That was one less thing to worry about anyway.

“She’s dangerous,” insisted an officer as Darcy moved to checking Jane’s pupils.

“So am I,” Thor countered. “So are all here, actually. My shield-kin are warriors born. Should you wish to open battle, you have but to ask.”

“Thor, that’s nice and all, but shut up,” she told him. He looked at her with confusion and anger. “Jane’s eyes are wrong. Wrong like the way Loki’s and Clint’s were, not wrong like she has a concussion. She needs help and I can’t give it. I’m not willing to risk her that way, I’m not as strong as Tasha.”

“Then we shall get her to a healer. Lady Eir is the most skilled I know,” he said, scooping Jane up in his huge arms. Darcy wordlessly moved to stand beside him and Steve and Bucky flanked her.

“We won’t be your problem much longer,” Steve said frostily to the officer. The man backed up yelling into his radio about armed response officers, and Jane blinked awake, clearing the blood-colored swirls from her eyes.

“What just happened?”

“Hold on to me,” Thor said gravely, lifting Mew-Mew.

“What are you doing?” Jane asked.

The Bifrost opened around them in a swirl of light and fractured musical harmonies. Darcy gasped at the rush.

“Holy shit!” In retrospect, probably not the most diplomatic thing to say upon first entering a sovereign kingdom, but in her defense, Bifrost travel would take getting used to. Or rather, for her, Steve who was clutching her hand, and Bucky who had gone faintly pale and green. Jane was looking like a kid in a candy store.

“We have to do that again,” Jane said to Thor. Smiling she looked around the gold rococo slash art deco dome and nodded to the far too large guard. “Hi.”

“Welcome to Asgard.” He smiled a fraction and stepped down from the platform that had been adding to Darcy’s impression of ‘too much guard’ with added height. “I am Heimdal, and I would thank the Lady Darcy to forgive my inability to weigh on matters of state. I like my eyes.”

Darcy finally broke out of the frozen shock to laugh. “I’m sure you did your best. And the court of public opinion can listen where the court of law might not. Sometimes that’s better. We came for a doctor, though. Jane is… not well.”

“Darcy, I’m fine.”

“You went missing for five hours and came back with magic blasty abilities that made your eyes funky looking. Please recall I once tased my own brother because his eyes were an indicator of something larger, something worse. Eyes going funky is an issue for me. You are seeing the damn doctor, Jane.”

“Fine. Then I get to ask impertinent questions. Deal?”

“You can ask impertinent questions during the exam, as long as you don’t spit out the Asgard
equivalent of a sub-lingual thermometer, okay Jane?” Darcy offered.

“Okay. Wait, why are there horses here, I don’t… No. No, Thor, I don’t ride horses!”

Darcy laughed and accepted Bucky’s boost up to the saddle. They might have come here out of desperation and danger, but Asgard was pretty, her men were hot, Jane was funny, and Darcy felt basically okay for once. Also, she was figuring out ways to prank the place already, and from how Bucky was eyeing the sniper’s nightmare that was the too-tall too-steep lines of the city in front of them, he wanted to know if he could drive a climbing piton into the gold. That gave her ideas for an interesting possible retaliation against the man who locked her brother up in solitary.

Steve had to agree with Doctor Foster, horses were bad news. Dangerous at both ends and tricky in the middle. He did like how Bucky looked in the saddle though, he had always sat straighter on the back of a horse than in a chair. From the appreciative hum coming from Darcy as Bucky swung into the saddle, she thought so too.

Actually getting Jane treated was less exciting than the ride into the city. Doctors were doctors were doctors in Steve’s experience, mostly useful and a bit puffed up about how helpful they really were. Eir seemed to be the better sort, but Steve really got along better with Underhealer Krydda, who acted more like a nurse.

“So you’re measuring her body for too much or the wrong kind of energy so you can decide how to help?” he asked in clarification while Jane and Eir fought over what the tool was called.

“Yes, basically.” Krydda agreed. “It can be a complex situation and we would usually give a much more detailed explanation than one sentence, but that is the idea.”

“Conciseness is it’s own skill, Underhealer. But if that’s all you’re doing, I suppose that’s alright.” Steve looked at where Darcy was baiting Eir for her own amusement and Jane’s honor. Knowing how she felt about Asgard at large and her current grudge against the powers that be, he figured it could take a while. Better find a way to amuse himself. “What sorts of preventative medicine does Asgard have? I’m a vaccine enthusiast, personally. It’s so great people figured out how to stop the illnesses from ever even happening.”

“Asgard made a choice generations ago to bind our natural energies to the health of our bodies, it keeps us strong and healthy and prevents susceptibility to illness. You bear some of the same signs the early choosers did.”

“There was a serum,” Steve offered. “It changed a few things.”

Underhealer Krydda laughed.

“Is understatement a skill like conciseness?” she asked.

“I suppose so. What was Asgard’s serum like?”

“Not a serum, for starters,” she returned. “A great spell that some chose to join and others did not. It affected the magic of our people, and our land. We are called the Realm Eternal for a reason. It doesn’t matter now,” she said, and Steve felt she was leaving things out, but he respected that choice. He nodded and Underhealer Krydda seemed to know he was alright with changing the topic.

“If you plan to have a child, you may want to have the prospective mother learn what happened to
the second and third generations. Some of them... well. Odin and the rest of the royal line are all
innately strong for many reasons, shall we say, and every mother among them had a handful in
raising them. I wasn't around for most of Odin's childhood, I'm not as old as Lady Eir. I trust those
who told me so, though, and would counsel you to take the tales as warning. The same sources tell
me his father, King Bor, was also quite... adventurous as a youth.

"Oh, you think the serum could have effects on my possible future children? Bigger, smarter,
something like that?"

"Potentially. Potentially possessing great seidr. Potentially a batch of little hellions."

"If they breed true, they'll be hellions regardless of serum," Bucky added. "Odin is coming, Punk,
you think we should warn our Doll he doesn't look happy, or warn him she gives as good as she
gets?"

"Or," Steve said slowly, "we could enjoy the show."

Bucky's lazy smile was a beautiful and somewhat terrifying thing. Steve chuckled low and dark at
the sight. Some things had changed since the war and the serum and the fucking train, but nothing
on God's green Earth could change how gorgeous his man was when contemplating the new hells
their girl would unleash. He felt his gaze narrow down on Bucky's mouth as the other man licked
his lips in that casually sinful way he had.

"We could do that, Punk," Bucky said. Rochambeau for the first congratulation kiss?"

"Sure," Steve agreed and tossed out paper to cover Bucky's rock. "You always throw the same
thing," he laughed as Bucky scowled.

Odin swept in, interrupting whatever retort Bucky was preparing.

"Are my words mere noises to you that you ignore them completely?" he asked Thor, ignoring the
rest of them, even Eir, and Steve felt his rage building.

"She's ill," Thor explained.

"She is mortal. Illness is their defining trait."

"That's true," Darcy added. "My sick burns are seriously ill."

Steve let his anger ebb out into a chuckle as Eir looked sharply at Darcy with concern. Of course,
Odin supplied him with more just as quickly

"She does not belong here in Asgard any more than a goat belongs at a banquet table. None of them
do."

"Did he just...?" Jane asked indignantly, sitting up on her elbows to glare at him. "Who do you
think you are?"

"I'm Odin. King of Asgard. Protector of the Nine Realms."

"Ennh," Darcy countered, her game show buzzer impression halting Odin in his tracks. "Eight.
You can claim to protect eight realms, maximum, dude. Maybe not even that, my inter-realm politics
is sort of out dated so I'm not sure about the others, but the last time you protected anyone on Earth,
Frosty the Homicidal Snowman was still a serious threat. Your claim to protecting us is null and
void as of the imposition of your Prime Directive law forbidding free and open contact. And it's not
an internal affairs issue, either. When we got invaded by off-worlders a year ago, you were not there. Thor was there, I was there, Jane was there, Steve was there. Bucky was a prisoner of war, or he would have been much more there than he actually was, which was still very helpful. You? You were not there. *Loki* was more help than you were.”

“How dare you?” Odin hissed, threat in every line of his body. He stepped toward Darcy and Jane slipped off the table to block his path.

“Don’t touch her,” Jane said simply. Odin reached to push her aside and red-black lightning struck him with enough force to rock him backwards a step. Jane’s eyes went the black of a void, empty and cold. Thor stepped to her side as she blinked away the darkness.

“Jane, are you alright?” the big blond asked the tiny scientist.

Jane nodded and the darkness tinging her vanished, revealing how much different she really had looked. It was a strange thing to realize he hadn’t seen all the changes, only her eyes, and yet they had turned her from a scattered scientist who ate like a troop of Marines and wore an excess of plaid flannel, into a dark and eternal goddess of destruction, a *Morrigan* in sensible jeans.

Odin had also been watching and was now doing a very simple diagnostic Steve had once seen Loki use when Darcy’s period made her unable to get out of bed.

“That’s impossible,” he denied, shock showing at the edges of his eye patch.

“The infection, it’s defending her,” Eir said.

“No, it’s defending *itself,*” Jane corrected. “I’m just necessary to it’s survival for now. How do I know that?”

“Come with me,” Odin ordered gravely. Everyone, even Darcy in her anger, was smart enough to lay off messing with him in the name of Jane’s recovery. Nobody was dumb enough to stay behind, as he had clearly intended the non-Jane and Thor portion of the group to do, however.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Sub-lingual thermometer- the kind that goes under the tongue, as opposed to in the ear or under the armpit.
Underhealer- my version of an Asgardian Nurse Aide.
Punk- Bucky’s nickname for Steve, technically meant ‘twink’ back in their day.
Doll- Bucky’s nickname for Darcy.
Rochambeau- rock paper scissors.
Sick burns- slang for insults.
Seriously ill- slang for cool or good.
Frosty the Homicidal Snowman- Darcy speak for the Jotun war.

Notes:
See the comment section of last chapter for more on my Aether headcanons.

The line "Ugh, we are running out of Time." is intended to have a capital 'T' referencing
the cosmic entity of Time. Technically, the cosmic entity of Time is called Eternity in the Marvel world, but I'm taking creative licence for the sake of flow in the Aether's abstract thinking.

Fluid dynamics are a part of physics, helping describe how non-solids function. The Aether does not obey the dynamics for true fluids when we see it in the films, and that will become relevant sooner or later.

Jane stays under longer in this than in the movie, my only defense is she's housing a thing like those shown to kill an individual who touches them, and everything nearby. It's hard on her system and to make her not stupidly OP compared to say, all the Guardians, I have to show it more.

Heimdal is referring to Darcy's threat back in Chapter 17 about what would happen if Loki was treated unfairly. He's low-key acknowledging both that Loki was treated unfairly and that he sees Darcy as a credible threat.

Steve is a City Boy who does not trust horses, this is a hill I would die on. So is Bucky being a casually good rider, like that one dick from middle school who only rode on trail rides at camp once a year but had a better seat than everyone except the instructor. Up yours Tiffany. (yes, I'm bitter.)

Steve likes nurses, his Ma was a Nurse. Krydda is one of the background healers who didn't get billing, but is the one he connects with because she looks a bit like Sarah Rogers.

I have headcanons about how MCU Asgard maintains the Realm Eternal status. Ask me!

Bucky does Seb's mouth thing, you know the one.

My Jane is more proactive as a result of being taught how to fight by Steve and Bucky, plus any non-combatant Avenger Affiliate self defense training (you know in a world where they stay in touch there would be such training.) This only changes some actions, but not the inevitable outcomes.

Steve calls Jane a Morrigan, the Irish death-goddesses of war. Some sources have The Morrigan as a singular being, others have many Morrigans serving together in a group, taking the form of a murder of crows. I'm using that second one here, to emphasize how scary Aether!Jane is.

Odin's magical skill is less than Loki's, hence he is not really known as a mage, but in the Eddas (in my verse the drunk-fic of the ancient Asgard set) Odin uses plenty of magic, and even gets called out by Loki for hypocrisy in how he treats a skilled male (bc gender rolls are not as good as sushi rolls but more common) magic user as less than a man when he too uses Seidr. I'm going to assume that means he can do magic, but people who got used to Seidr with Loki will always think it's kiddie magic, the Harrow boys could do that c'mon.
Chapter Summary

Darcy needles Odin while learning what it is she's worrying about.

Loki learns his sister has come to Asgard.

Bucky is having trouble adapting to yet another role he's not trained for.

Chapter Notes

OMG, thank you, all of you, for supporting me even when I had to tap out for a bit. My heart condition is back under control, and I hope to get back to at least once a week posting. I could not have done this without all you lovelies reassuring me that a short break wouldn't kill interest. I'll come back and add the Love Fest Thanks later, but for now, assume if you've been here waiting, this is for you.

Darcy stood close to Jane as Odin led them into a study. He was seriously wigging her out with how solemn and somber he was acting around Jane now that he knew what was up. The not-talking thing wasn’t helping, so she was thankful when he spoke up.

“There are relics that predate the universe itself. What lies within her appears to be one of them. The Nine Realms are not eternal. They had a dawn as they will have a dusk,” Odin intoned.

Great, not at all ominous or anything, she thought at her men over a slightly opened swap link.

“We’ll get through this Angel, Steve reassured her as Odin stepped back to let them look at an ancient book with moving pictures of the style found in illuminated manuscripts inked in it.

“But before that dawn the dark forces, the Dark Elves, reigned absolute and unchallenged.”

“Yes Father,” Thor sighed. “I do remember. “Born of eternal night, the Dark Elves comes to steal away your light.” They were these stories mother told us as children.”

“Dude, you’re showing us an Asgard board-book?” Darcy asked. “Not cool. I mean, you have gifs in your baby books, and that’s neat, but seriously, you could try treating us less like infants. You know, for a little change of pace?”

Odin ignored her, but she saw a tic developing at his temple. It was progress, anyway. “Their leader, Malekith, made a weapon out of that darkness, it was called the Aether. While the other relics often appeared as stones, the Aether is fluid--”

“Actually, it’s a Bose–Einstein condensate,” Jane interrupted. “The fluid dynamics show signs of zero viscosity and quantized vortices, consistent with superfluid helium, but also the color shows a tendency to slow light down which is only found in Bose… oh.” Darcy smiled as Jane figured out...
only Odin actually knew what the hell she was saying.

“*You are* a seidkonur,” Odin said with some amusement. “But even you can agree it is ever changing. It changes matter into dark matter and seeks out to host bodies, drawing strength from their life force. Malekith sought to use the Aether’s power to return the universe to one of darkness. But after eternities of bloodshed, my father Bor, finally triumphed, ushering in the peace that lasted thousands of years.”

“What happened?” Jane asked. “If I picked anything up from Darcy, it’s that peace is never easy and never cheap. It wouldn’t be worth the fuss we make over it if it were.”

“He killed them all,” Odin answered. “It was the only way.”

“I think I’ve heard that story before,” Steve growled.

“Easy, Stevie,” Bucky said, metal hand on Steve’s arm. “That was Odin’s father, not Odin. Pick your battles, please. I’m not ready for what you’re thinking.”

Steve relaxed half a fraction, but Darcy could see being near someone who approved of any kind of Final Solution was testing his resolve not to get them killed.

“Are you certain?” Thor demanded. “The Aether was said to have been destroyed with them and yet here it is. If they yet live, we must find a way to prevent their return beginning a cycle of retribution we cannot stop. Preferably without destroying them as well.” He ran a hand through his hair and Darcy could tell he wanted Loki. She wanted Loki, for that matter, he knew things they didn’t and they could really use the help is an ancient race of possible mass murderers was about to wake up and come after what was under Jane’s skin.

“The Dark Elves are dead,” Odin repeated. He wasn’t taking arguments on this one, but she could see pain there too. He might know genocide was the wrong call, but not want to bash dear old dad. She nodded slightly to shift her people off that topic.

“Does your book happen to mention how to get it out of me?” Jane asked. “I’m not wild about being a host to a BEC. They are not typically healthy to touch.”

“No, it does not,” Odin admitted.

Loki stood casually near the transparent wall of his cell, hoping for another face besides that of his guard or the prisoners in nearby cells. He was not disappointed. Fandral and Volstagg led prisoners past him and when they could, gave him small smiles. It wasn’t much, but they had been forbidden to speak to him by Odin. He knew this and he forgave it, their own lives would be made near as bad as his, should they go against the word and law of the All-Father. That didn’t stop them passing information, as they struck up a conversation near his cell.

“Did you hear? They say the Lady Darcy, heart-sister to Thor, has come to Asgard,” Volstagg said. Darcy, his sister of the soul, she had come for him. The news was unexpected but welcome.

“I did,” Fandral replied. “And that her soul-bound mates have attended with her and Thor’s Lady Jane. They went straight to the healers, and I heard from one of the Soul Forge attendants that the Prince’s Lady was afflicted. Else surely the Lady Darcy should have sought me immediately.”

Loki stifled a cough. Darcy would have sought Loki first, knowing his situation as she did. Any
emergency of Jane’s that required a Soul Forge would take precedence, though, and he knew it. But now she was in Asgard, it would take more skill than many of Odin’s court possessed to catch her and drive her out again before she freed him.

“HAH!” Volstagg scoffed. “You boast, Fandral. The Lady Darcy has likely forgotten your face, and lucky she to have the chance to erase your hideous visage from her mind. She has better things to pursue, I am sure. I heard talk of children.”

Children? He started doing the math of months passed between the last he saw of her and her mates, and how long Lady Ciara had said Midgardian pregnancy lasted. Unless he had lost time, she shouldn’t be traveling by Bifrost yet!

“Adopted children,” Fandral said carefully. Loki understood the source of his care with the topic, but was grateful for the clarification. “It has not been so long since I last saw her to have borne children of her blood, I do not think. And were it, she is a loving enough soul she would not abandon them to travel with the Prince here, and she brought no babe with her. Nevertheless, I think she shall make a fine mother.”

The last of the prisoners were safely locked up, and they had no reason to stay. Still, they shot sad looks at Loki and he smiled at them. A certain hard edge ruined it somewhat, he had yet to regain his old skill with words, as only his mother’s illusionary self could speak to him in return.

“Odin continues to bring me new friends. How thoughtful,” he said with a slight sneer. It was hard not to when he spoke Odin’s name, but the two seemed to understand. “Perhaps Mother will have a fit of nostalgia and tell Thor to share again. I do so ever love the afterthought.”

“That’s not fair to Frigga and you know it,” Volstagg insisted hotly. Their friendship had not mended as well as it could, but then again, the big man had always liked Thor better. “She has ever done her best by you, even when others couldn’t be arsed to lift a finger.”

“You aren’t supposed to reply,” Fandral hissed. “And you are missing the point. Try thinking with something aside from your gut for a moment and try to hear what others say. You’ll find it leads to much greater understanding.”

Volstagg blinked at the swordsman’s intense gaze, narrowed in the sharp and steely intent one didn’t think he had, until one was pinned under it. Realization dawned, and Volstagg nodded before the two left.

Loki smiled. His sister was coming and he could taste the freedom she would bring, like a summer storm in the air, ripe with sky fire and the heady potential of rain. His Shadow Sister blown in with the dark clouds, ready to rip the world with lightning. He hoped Thor’s Lady would be alright, in some distant way, but his heart was singing for Darcy and freedom.

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Bucky was mildly disturbed by the level of interpersonal drama he’d been subjected to since landing in Asgard. He had plenty with his own guilt issues and the general relationship soup that was the Avengers, thanks, he didn’t need front row seats to Thor’s family crap. Which was why he pretty happily agreed to take the rooms they were offered and change clothing.

“Bucky,” Darcy complained, halfway between warning and whining as the attendant walked away with Jane and Thor.

“Dollface, I need to be away from these people or we are going to end up learning why Asgard
needs a TSA safety board. It’s like one of your shows, it’s so convolutedly horrible.”

“You promised you wouldn’t give me crap for watching soap operas. Not cool dude.”

Bucky sighed. He pulled her and Steve into the room they’d been left in front of. He took a moment to admire the rich furnishings before pulling Darcy into a hug. She melted into his arms and he let out a cautious breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

“Doll, Punk, I’m really trying here,” he admitted. “But I don’t know if I can do this. I’m not good at words the way you are Darcy, and I can’t make everyone love me the way you do Steve. And yes, you do make people love you. I usedta be charming, at least. The harmless flirt who could say sweet nonsense and spin a dame out on the dance floor a few times and give her something to whisper about with her friends. That got taken from me. The skill set got rusty in cryo, I guess. And here we are in a new culture, again, surrounded by people we probably need to at least not hate us, again, who we aren’t allowed to shoot, again. I hate it. There is no good answer for me here. Please at least let me put in a costume and try to get into character. Acting is all I got left.”

Darcy softened and slid out of his hold while Steve filled the spot she left. His Punk kissed him gently and rubbed circles on his back while their Doll selected clothing.

“Here you go,” she said, but her voice cracked around the cheer.

“Darcy, Angel, are you alright?” Steve asked her. Bucky nodded to show he also cared, but took the offered stack.

“I’m falling to bits emotionally over Jane and Loki and Odin is a raging douchenozzle, but I think I can keep up appearances.” It was a blunt, painful assessment of how she felt, and Bucky felt like a world class idiot for not seeing how much she hurt.

“What can we do to support you?” he asked.

“Fix Jane’s superweapon infection, free my brother from Maximum Security, or punch Odin in the dick. Sorry those aren’t real workable options.”

“They might be more workable than you believe, Lady Darcy,” said a new man Bucky hadn’t heard coming. Once he would have berated himself for getting distracted enough to let the sword carrying blonde sneak up on them. Now, he leveled his murder stare at the man. The strangely familiar man. Who was bowing.

“YOU ASSHOLE!” Bucky growled as the pieces clicked together. “You’re the shit that tried to steal Darcy!”

“What?” Steve asked flatly, his face shuttering in the dangerous way he had.

“Back in New Mexico, he tried to get her to go with him, I remember that.”

Darcy started laughing. “Bucky, he wanted to help me find you. Asgard has better tech and magic for understanding what I do, and Fandral thought a few scans could maybe help figure out what the hell was up with my suspended Swaps. He’s a friend, lay off.”

“Oh.” Bucky flushed a bit in shame. He hadn’t known that. “In that case, you said workable?”

The man, Fandral, laughed. He seemed unperturbed by Bucky’s misplaced homicidal desires. “Yes, though not all of them. I know not how to free the Lady Jane, although she seems a capable enough seidkonur to find a path through this. Such a task would go faster with a second mind in play,
however. Fortunately, I know exactly where to find one. I could never dare to free a prisoner from Asgard’s dungeons, to do so would be treason. I can however casually mention to a friend… that they should not go down the stairs at the end of this corridor three levels and then through the lesser kitchen, lest they end up among the less savory inhabitants of the palace. Particularly not in the next half turn of a glass, as the guards will be changing shift, and guards exist for our own safety.”

Bucky fit the pieces together and looked at the clothes in his arms. They were a similar color and cut to the uniforms of the guards he’d seen, only without armor.

“That is great advice, Fandral. I’m terrible with directions, I always get turned around. One time I made a wrong turn on a train and ended up in Russia,” Bucky said solemnly, but he could feel a grin slipping onto his face. “I should get changed and go check on Jane. Down the hall, that way, right?”

“I believe we shall be great friends,” Fandral replied. “Lately I have had but one partner for my rapier wit, and that friendship somewhat restricted. I do wish I did not waste such enjoyments when they were freely given.”

“Friends are good,” Bucky said neutrally. “But now, please leave. Darcy is going to want to change too, I can tell by the way she’s eyeing the wardrobe, and I’m not friendly enough for you to stay during that.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Board-book- the kid books made from cardboard pages to limit tearing.
Final Solution- genocide, this term has HEAVY Nazi connotations.
Arsed- bothered.
TSA safety board- the people who decide how people should be checked for weapons in airports.

Notes:
I can’t have been the only one to notice Thor acted like Odin was dumbing shit down, nor the only one to want to fix it. You’re welcome.

The Aether we see in the film doesn’t behave like a true fluid, it acts like a BEC, or Bose-Einstein Condensate, the state of matter of a dilute gas of bosons cooled to temperatures very close to absolute zero (that is, very near 0 K or −273.15 °C). It’s important in quantum physics and Jane would know that. It would also be a giant "THIS NERD KNOWS SHIT" sign to talk about the difference between a true fluid and a superfluid-esque BEC.

Bor’s treatment of the Dark Elves is super not-good, and Steve is correct to draw ethnic cleansing comparisons, but it also has it’s own history that we don’t see and Bucky is right to keep Steve from summarily declaring war on people who were not around when that choice was made.

Loki has been cut off from contact by order of Odin. Frigga can sneak her illusions in with minimal risk, but the other people who may want to tell him stuff have to be more cautious, hence the conveniently placed conversation about topics he’d be interested in.
I sort of feel that Volstagg doesn't have enough in common with Loki to really sustain a friendship, and the best they'll have is not outwardly antagonistic to each other. Fandral on the other hand at least enjoys word-play like Loki does and will probably aim for something closer to friends, and both are okay.

Volstagg and Fandral have a friendship built on trading barbs, much like the bro-friendships in frat houses where communication can break down into nothing but yo-mama jokes and the word "dude" at times, and they still like each other. It's strange, but it works for them.

Loki being adopted is probably not as big a hot button as Fandral thinks due to Loki getting a set of family that is purely adopted both to him and to each other, but it's sweet of him to think of that.

Bucky Is Done With Yo Shit Asgard. He really wants to stab the next person who makes drama, but knows that would just get them stuck in more drama. He's not normally this bad mental-health-wise, but stress is a nasty thing and it makes him act out of character. Same for Darcy getting a bit bitchy, she's under stress.

For those who haven't read the Thor arc in Bodies in Time, Bucky caught a tiny flash of Fandral saying goodbye to Darcy that seemed incriminating, but wasn't. Now that's straightened out, he and Fandral will likely get along famously, as they are both charming SOB's who love women and particularly smart, brassy women, and aren't we lucky to live in a time/place with such great Queens? Bucky winds up owning three different copies of Single Ladies by Beyonce and Fandral frames his autographed Pepper Potts Forbes cover.

Teaser:

“Doll,” he groaned. “I’m trying to pick an alien padlock here. I cannot be thinking of your glorious bosom, not if you want the door open. I will gladly think about it after we get your brother back, okay?”
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Darcy stages a jail-break, Steve meets more Asgardians, and Jane is blind-sided by needing to human on short notice.

Chapter Notes

SHE LIVES!!!!
I'm back guys! Thank you to everyone who's still with me through all this, especially Shadows_of_Shemai, quadrad, Chickalupe, Beth_Mac, SionnachOiche3, nemohana, ValkyriePhoenix, Joey99, HawkeyeState, and Selene_Aduial for leaving comments on the not-really-a-chapter where I announced my unfortunate computer-related hiatus. The non-chapter will be coming down soon for reading ease.

Love Fest shout outs to Shadows_of_Shemai, Snowecat, Beth_Mac, Notashamed, rosiedeplume, SionnachOiche3, Maedae84, tigrislilium, FantasyTLOU, ValkyriePhoenix, nemohana, quadrad, ClockWeasel, Selene_Aduial, ValkyriePhoenix, Joey99, SerialObsessor (DlStar71), halfelf87, Melissa Dixon, and queixo for comments on the last actual chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy adored the clothing Thor’s people arranged for her. She hoped Jane got something just as nice in her room as the layered burgundy and silver lace flutter dress accented with armor Darcy got. She’d squealed when she saw it really was accented with literal, actual armor, not her standard cute or boss bitch clothing as metaphorical lady-armor. Darcy kind of thought she could take an actual hit on her tit-armor, which was partly hidden under silk and steel filigree to create an illusion of separation despite the sports-bra style coverage.

“Hey, do you think I could shrug off a hit to the tit?” she asked, letting out a quiet giggle snort when Bucky got flustered. Steve was waiting in the kitchen to distract people with his ‘aw shucks’ routine that fooled only strangers to how much of a little shit the man was, but Bucky, and his delicious leather covered ass, were beside her, picking the lock.

“Doll,” he groaned. “I’m trying to pick an alien padlock here. I cannot be thinking of your glorious bosom, not if you want the door open. I will gladly think about it after we get your brother back, okay?”

“My, you think I could shrug off a hit to the tit?” she asked, letting out a quiet giggle snort when Bucky got flustered. Steve was waiting in the kitchen to distract people with his ‘aw shucks’ routine that fooled only strangers to how much of a little shit the man was, but Bucky, and his delicious leather covered ass, were beside her, picking the lock.

“Deal,” she agreed. She could wait to be admired, Loki was too close to fuck up Bucky’s concentration. Really, who even knew what the fuck Odin had been thinking, putting someone that badly damaged into solitary?

The lock clicked free a moment later and Bucky handed back her specialty hair pins, that could pick any lock that had even a passing acquaintance with keys or tumblers (thank you Tony), which she tucked back in the twisted messy-bun she’d done to keep her hair out of her face. And hide shit, her
hair was big because it was full of secrets. They slipped through the dim halls silently on perfectly broken in shoes. Like, yeah, she was happy to jail break her brother and get his help with Jane, but goddamn did she need the number of Thor’s personal shopper.

She spotted him across an aisle and tapped Bucky’s arm. Using their old Army hand codes, she directed her boyfriend to where her brother was. Bucky pointed out the guard. The crappy lighting was great for them sneaking, but less great for spotting guards. Darcy un-holstered her taser and slipped up close and low. As Bucky circled around to the cell’s lock, Darcy tapped the guard on the arm.

“I am so sorry about this,” she told him as he turned to face the sudden intrusion into his domain. She shrugged, then interrupted his reply with her taser in his Adam’s apple. No scream that way. She caught him before he hit the ground and helped him to rescue position. “Sleep well, and dream of large women.”

“Doll, I can’t figure out the lock,” Bucky said under his breath.

“It’s been enchanted,” Loki told them from inside. His voice was rough and a bit hard, like he’d forgotten how to use kind words. “It can only be opened with Odin’s blood.”

“It’s a DNA lock?” she asked. Hey, being a part time super-spy could maybe finally pay off some of the crap she put up with from it. “Good thing I stole Jane’s ring.” She slipped the silver round from her index finger and pressed the setting, cabochon stone and all, into the gold light that formed the walls. They dropped away and Bucky held a hand out to help Loki down.

“When did the Lady Jane ever get a ring with the All-Father’s blood on it?” Loki demanded.

“She slapped Thor,” Darcy explained. “Didn’t quite cut him, but he lost a few hairs in the setting and I saw a scrape. Thor is related to Odin by birth, I was hoping that was enough.”

“That, as you would say, is quite without price.”

“Priceless, Loki, I would say priceless. Now let’s jet, mind doing a minute make-over?”

“If I must.” He rippled in that odd way that sent her eyes skittering off him and when she blinked, he was a she, in a green gown to match hers.

“Gah, you are too pretty, Bro-Bro.”

“I could look like a Jotun,” he offered, shifting to an Amazonian blue woman with glowing orange eyes. “You could too, but I think we stick out enough, don’t you?”

“I think you were right,” she said a bit pettily, “blue doesn’t suit you.”

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Back in the triad’s rooms, Loki was beginning to recover, but Steve could see the battle with his trauma was far from won. Darcy alternated teasing and fussing, and Bucky spun a great story to the maid about increased metabolisms to get a meal before dinner for him. Steve was still unsure the best way to help when an unexpected knock sent Loki into a frozen, horrifyingly still silence.

He opened the door a tiny crack, and was prepared to turn away the two blondes when the older one pushed past him.

“My son,” she sighed and went to hug Loki. Steve assumed that must be Frigga. He still didn’t
know who the other one was when she pushed into the room in Frigga’s wake, carrying a leather bag like a doctor’s.

“You really are my most troublesome patient,” she chided.

“I’m your only patient, Sigyn,” he said and Steve felt it click. Loki loved her. “Your father—”

“My father is not up for discussion unless you want to talk about yours. Either of yours. Now, let me take a look, you know trying to do sorcery in the dungeons is wearing on your seidr.”

Steve smiled as Loki submitted to her treatments and found Darcy snuggled up beside him. They’d freed an unjustly imprisoned man being subjected to inhumane treatment and reunited him with his loved ones. Not a bad day.

“I think the first Avenging we did in Asgard went well,” he murmured into his Angel’s dark curls.

“Mmm,” she agreed. “Now we save Jane from the Aether.”

“THE WHAT?” Loki shrieked, startling Sigyn.

“Ah, yes, we have some recap to do, don’t we?” Darcy said serenely. Steve laughed and Loki facepalmed, much to the confusion of the two Asgardian women.

“I think you’ve tortured him enough, Angel,” he said when he stopped laughing. “We got into Asgard because Jane went missing for five hours and came back able to knock men flat with a sort of crimson, oxblood color energy. Odin called it Aether and said there was no way to remove it. I’ll assume you know the rest of that story.”

Loki pulled a face of distaste. “Yes, quite. Unfortunately, only Malekith knew how to remove it from a living host. It will leave a dead one of its own accord, but I doubt that’s a solution to the current problem. I’ve never studied it closely before, the record keeping around that was… notoriously spotty. I think they were counting on everyone forgetting it. Fools.”

“Loki, how dangerous is this to Jane?” Darcy asked seriously. “I mean, will it kill her if we leave it be?”

“It is just as powerful as the Tesseract,” he replied. “Maybe more powerful, they have never been measured side by side, as keeping two Infinity Stones close to each other is the greatest folly. Before, there have been those who sought all of them, but they died for that mistake. It would take a true madman to collect them.” The emphasis he placed on the word ‘madman’ made Steve blink.

“Mad as a hatter?” he asked.

“Exactly,” Loki agreed. “Individually the Stones can destroy worlds, but only one who wishes to court the Lady Death would want all of them.”

“What the hell does Lyuda have to do with anything? She already got married, who’d be trying to court her?” Bucky asked. Everyone blinked at him. “Oh, no. I am not calling some Asgard magic woo-woo chick ‘Lady Death’ after all the crap my girl Lyudmila Pavlichenko went through to get, keep, and learn to accept that title. Lady Death was a Soviet sniper, the Grim Reaper can be plain old Death.”

Steve shrugged. He knew there were some things they didn’t accept changing. “So back to the original question, what sort of time frame on Jane are we looking at? The Tesseract burned Skull up in seconds, Jane’s had that thing in her for almost a day, if we think she was infected at the beginning
of her missing time.”

“Well, it does require a host,” Loki said unsurely. “How often has she used it? It might only be affecting her as it leaves her body.”

“Twice, so far,” Darcy said. “She’s with Thor. Can you go get her, Queen Frigga? We’re going to need to look her over, without walking around with Asgard’s Most Wanted next to us.”

“Of course, my soul daughter.”

“Wait, what?”

“You didn’t think my sons were the only ones who could see the family resemblance, did you? You’ll make an excellent daughter.”

“I don’t want to be a princess,” Darcy said and Steve laughed. Her face was just too priceless.

“You won’t be, Odin isn’t adopting you, I am,” Frigga clarified before sweeping out.

“She’s like that,” Sigyn explained. “Should I go as well?”

“No,” Steve said quickly, stopping the Asgardain healer from leaving by shifting to block the straightest line to the door. It wouldn’t actually trap her, but it would keep her from thinking he wanted her to bolt. “We’ll need a doctor, and if Loki says you’re a good doctor, that’s enough for me. He’s right about that sort of thing fairly often.”


“I trust him,” Steve replyed. “I trust him with my life, and more importantly, with the lives of my family. He has good judgment, and he doesn’t trust at all easily, but he trusts you. You’re a fool if you discard that in the face of other’s opinions, Miss Sigyn.”

Loki started to protest, and Sigyn stopped him. “I see why he likes you, Captain. And I was merely testing you. I trust him, just not openly. There’s an issue with my father.”

Darcy started to laugh. “We are gonna get along great, sister.”

Jane had been really enjoying the low stress tour of Asgard Thor took her on when his mom showed up. Which was awkward, because, well, the mom of the guy she kinda liked a whole lot (Darcy could call him her boyfriend because Darcy was her normal person translator, and everyone else could forget trying to get her to confirm anything) walked in on Jane’s Science-gasm face. Thor liked her Science-gasm face, and Darcy thought it was cute, but ordinary people sometimes took it wrong. Also, Frigga was a Queen. Sure, Thor and Loki were Princes, but Jane could and would ignore that, they were also huge doofuses who got tricked into stealing her Doublestuff Oreos by toddlers. Frigga wasn’t at all doofusy.

Jane knew she was bright red and stuttering when Frigga laughed elegantly behind her hand as she ushered her to the residential wing. So unfair, Darcy was the one who trained to deal with royalty! Ok, a masters degree in Poly-Sci wasn’t actually royal-herder training, but it was better than doctorates in moderately pointless sciences. Except her degrees did come in useful now that Thor and Einstein-Rosen bridges and sentient superfluids were a fact of life.

Frigga ignored Jane’s internal struggle and gently pushed her into a room. Jane stopped mid-protest
to squeal and tackle-hug Loki. He sputtered and flailed a bit, so she let go quickly.

“You got out! I’m so happy for you! Did the evidentiary packet Darcy have me make on the psychological effects of the void and mind control help any?”

“I… well I didn’t use it,” Loki admitted. “It was a private court, and there was no point. Odin made up his mind before I walked in.”

Jane didn’t think. She slapped him. “You had a chance to try and you passed on it? You had a chance to make the people who doubted you listen and you didn’t take it! I did good work, why did you not trust me? I trusted you!”

Jane glared as the blonde next to him started to laugh.

“These are the sorts of problems to have,” she said. “You have people disappointed because they trusted you to do more, now. I’m not sure you even need me.”

“I’ll always need you, Lady Sigyn the True,” Loki said quietly. “And perhaps seidkonur Foster can continue this after the two of us have examined her? The power in her is quite dangerous, and I would not fail my sister.”

Jane sighed. More tests and she didn’t even get to run the data.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
- Jet- to leave quickly.
- Bro-Bro- a nickname for a brother.
- Crimson/oxblood- two names for very dark red.

Notes:
- Darcy's dress can be found on http://firefly-path.deviantart.com/ under Elegant Armor Gown. Much of the stuff there inspired my Asgard aesthetic.

"Her hair is big because it's full of secrets" is a line from Mean Girls.

"Sleep well and dream of large women" is a line from The Princess Bride.

I totally made up Jane's ring, it's a MacGuffin, so just go with it. Also, this is not how real DNA locks work/would work, but it's the space vikings, weirder deus ex machina has been pulled.

Lady Loki is attractive enough to cause sisterly jealousy, but everyone here knows Darcy isn't actually mad at Loki for being pretty.

Sigyn is, in the Eddas, Loki's loving and beloved wife. She's insanely faithful and true to him in the face of so much crap. In Marvel comic-canon, he tricked her into marrying him and she hates him. I'm going with something sort of between. My Sigyn loves Loki and is faithful to him, but pays lip service to the common trends where he's concerned because she's not in a safe place to defy Odin's implied wishes.

Steve's mad as a hatter reference is to the code name Darcy gave Thanos, "Mad Hatter".
and he's asking confirmation that it's the same entity.

Lady Death is one of the names for the Cosmic Entity of Death/Entropy in the Marvel Universe. It's also the nickname given to WWII Soviet Sniper (and in this story, friend of Bucky) Lyudmila Pavlichenko. She earned that name and the respect it implies from her comrades in arms, and that's why Bucky flips his lid over actual Death being called that. He's okay with a female Death, but not with devaluing Lyuda.

Teaser:

“She TASED HIM?” Steve screeched, for once not minding Darcy’s higher register.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

An alarm signals battle, and what people are made of is seen.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To angelofheaven, Beth_Mac, SionnachOiche3, quadrad, Joey99, ValkyriePhoenix, Notashamed, Maedae84, Selene_Aduial, tigrislilium, MarauderHeir, Shadows_of_Shemaia, and JER.

Happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me, happy birthday dear Baiiiiirm, happy birthday to me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy paced nervously, every inch of her body on edge from all the vagueness of studying Jane’s condition when the alarms went off. She felt herself jump, checking quickly on her people, a silent and instinctual headcount. Steve turned to the main door, Bucky slid seamlessly into Murderbot Mode and prowled near the back door Fandral had used, Jane was pale and sweating, and Loki froze up like a deer in headlights. Nobody was happy about this.

“The prisons,” Frigga said on the edge of breathless, reminding Darcy she should probably care about more than just her long-term people. “Loki…”

“Will not be going back,” Darcy finished for her. “Trust me, I know what happens when people try to take my guys. Hint, it doesn’t end well for them. Bucky, guard the room. Loki, watch his six. Jane, only let loose if you have to, it might be hurting you. Steve, grab the shield, we have Avenging to do.”

“And what of me?” Frigga asked. Damn, so much for resolutions made in fear.

“Find Thor and Odin, behave normally, keep your husband out of my rooms, meet up with me if you can.”

“Darce, where are we going?” Steve asked her as she hooked her taser holster to her dress.

“The prison level, to stop the break out.” She winked at him. “It would be rude not to show up for this very unexpected emergency when our allies here might need us.”

“Yes, it would be, wouldn’t it? Ma did raise me to be helpful.”

Darcy laughed at the solemn, earnest face he pulled. Steve’s Gee-Wilikers shtick was a never ending source of amusement. The three left quickly, only to be stopped by Fandral, who told them it was less a scare about Loki’s escape and more a prison riot.

“Maybe avoiding that would be a good thing…” Darcy said, hesitating. She’d been discrete, but
there was a chance one of the prisoners had seen her and Bucky. Getting ID’d if the emergency wouldn’t already implicate her was a risky chance.

“I’ll go, stay with the Queen, Angel,” Steve said, kissing her temple. “We’ll get through this.”

Darcy nodded. Steve ran off beside the Asgardian swashbuckler and Frigga guided her towards Odin. The lapse in respect for the All-Father was apparent in how hectic the guards were compared to how they reacted to Fandral’s rapid orders.

“Odin,” Frigga said with a certain level of fond frustration.

“Frigga,” he replied, before turning to yell at the squadron. “Go!”

“This looks sort of gnarly,” Darcy commented, which spurred the guards to finally move in an orderly fashion.

“It’s a skirmish, nothing to fear.”

“You’ve never been a very good liar,” Frigga told him. Darcy laughed, drawing his eye.

“Take her to your chambers, I’ll come for you when it’s safe,” Odin told his wife.

“And you take care,” Frigga admonished.

“Despite all I have survived, my queen still worries over me,” Odin said.

“In my experience, my men survived because I worried over them,” Darcy said in defense of the Queen’s worry. She knew the strong woman struggle, and obviously sisters before misters. Odin huffed and Frigga smiled serenely.

“Listen to me now,” Frigga said when Darcy started to protest. “I need you to do everything I ask and no questions. There is no time, or I wouldn’t say that.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Darcy said briskly. “I was Army, in a way. Orders I can do.”

The preparations were swift and reasonably understandable, leaving Darcy to wonder why Frigga thought she would have resisted the plan. Her musings were cut short when the door banged open and Darcy’s heart leapt to her throat.

“Stand down, creature,” Frigga said fearlessly, stepping between Darcy and the guy who needed to discover body butter like five years ago. “You may still survive this.”

“I have survived worse, woman,” he spat and Darcy’s hackles rose.

“Oh yeah?” she asked, enraged. “And who the fuck are you?”

“I am Malekith, and I would have what it is mine.” He stalked forward and Darcy’s taser was sweaty in her palm as Frigga lashed out with a sword. They fought faster than Darcy’s eyes could track, but a new guy showed up at the last minute and Frigga had told her to stay still, so Darcy did. She hated it, but the bait needed to look weak, she got that. Super-Weapon Maker-guy turned to her with greedy eyes and Darcy felt calm fill her heart.

“You have taken something, child. Give it back,” he demanded, grabbing her arm. Talon-like nails cut into her skin, drawing blood and Darcy’s only real though on that was that her job was gonna suck even more now. Light rippled over her skin a second after he touched her and Darcy grabbed his hand to lock him in place. “Witch! Where is the Aether?”
“I’ll never tell,” Frigga said, smirking. Darcy thumbed her taser on and jammed it into her attacker’s gut. The pain was nauseatingly intense, and she felt her knees wobble before her senses cut out. The last thing she heard was screaming.

Steve had gotten in the swing of fighting, and Thor’s friends had finally adapted to the shield flying around them like a discus of death, when he felt the pull of Darcy’s swap link.

“Thor, I’m traveling!” he called and ducked into an alcove for cover.

“Safe journey, shield-brother!” Thor called back.

Light dropped away and Steve stood on Darcy’s shaking legs, glancing at a huge creature menacing Queen Frigga. Quickly, he grabbed a vase and chucked it at the thing’s head.

“Hey, ugly! Pick on someone your own size!”


“I’m like a Weeble,” Steve offered, a description Darcy had used once for all three of them, while taking a moment to wrap the gashes from the fallen attacker’s nails. No need to let her get faint when he could sacrifice a scarf to keep her blood inside her body.

“What?” It actually sounded like he’d confused the creature, and the rocky planes of it’s face had shifted and bunched like a furrowed brow.

“Well, I wobble but I don’t fall down,” Steve explained. “The sales jingle, ‘Weebles wobble but they don’t fall down’?” Queen Frigga let out a sound that could have been a snicker, but she hid it well.

“Oh you are amusing,” she told him.

“Thank you, Ma’am. Now I suggest our muscle-bound friend here back off. If you leave now I’ll even let you take Sleepy here with you,” Steve offered. He hated giving that much, but the crumpled unconscious body at his feet looked like Darcy had already made an object example of him, and it would take a while to recover from that, based on past experience. “Or I could always just keep punching him. I wonder how many times I’d have to bounce his head like a basketball for him not to wake up?”

“Wretch,” the thing by Frigga spat, but released her and the two left as Odin barged in.

“My Queen!” he called, rushing to hold his wife, who was now rubbing an appearing purple-green mark on her arm where the big guy had grabbed her. Steve sort of wished he could have hit him with more than the vase, now that he could see the rising bruise, but the monster had already gone, and there was no use complaining after the bad guy escaped the base.

“Husband, all is well. The lady Darcy defended me,” Frigga said. “With her marvelous little weapon of bottled lightning, the one Thor speaks so highly of. I see why now.”

“She TASED HIM?” Steve screeched, for once not minding Darcy’s higher register. It let him say things how he felt them, shrill and sharp. “No fucking wonder she had to swap me in, the current traveled! He was touching her blood stream, wasn’t he? I love her, and I know this is hypocritical, but she is so reckless at times.”
Frigga looked at him funny and Steve remembered that they hadn’t shared Darcy’s ability yet. He said a silent prayer of thanks when Thor came in with his body slung over the Thunder-god’s shoulders.

“Ah, Captain,” he said, nodding. “Lady Darcy is too weak as yet to transfer back, shall I take her to your rooms?”

Darcy mumbled something Steve didn’t quite catch and he rushed to her side. “Did we win?” she clarified.

“Yes, Angel, we won, but never do that again, okay? What if I couldn’t have gotten to a safe place to swap from?”

“S’what Bucky is for,” she mumbled.

“I’m telling Jane you burned yourself out,” he threatened without heat. “Let’s get you to a bed, Angel.”

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Odin would not have believed any of the story he heard, if it had not come from his Queen’s own lips, and had he not walked in to see the end of the tale unfold before his eye. Late that night, in their chambers, Frigga described how she disguised the shorter Midgardian woman as the host of the Aether, how they lured Malekith and his Kursed into a trap together. How the Lady Darcy, for she had earned the title with bravery beyond the call, had held the Dark Elf still, risking herself as she poured the destructive force of raw lightning’s fire into her attacker. How he had fallen and with a scream, Lady Darcy had stood to threaten the Kursed in words not her own, and her soul’s mate guarding and guiding her actions drove off the enemy.

This was rare magic, the kind he had not thought still lived in Midgard, the kind that had never lived in Asgard, even in the time of Buri the Undying. By-passing time and space to forge the strongest of bonds, normally to suffer great pain in trade for doing great deeds. Through this, somehow, a love had been born that shouldn’t, by all rights, have worked and yet it did as obvious and clear as the sun’s light at midday.

He had greatly misjudged these Midgardians.

“My Queen, how badly could that battle have gone?” he asked, when her story had finished. He knew Frigga could sometimes tell what may have been, with different choices. He had used that gift of side-scrying before, to learn from mistakes made and unmade, disaster forever lost to what may have been. If he had been so wrong about the fiber of these heroes, and indeed that they were true heroes, how much more wrong could he have been about other things?

“I could have died,” she said bluntly. “I perhaps ought to have died, so strongly do I see that chance, as though the Norns wish me to see the arrow that missed me by a breath. Should it have been any other but the Lady Darcy with me in that room, I would have perished. She was… uniquely able and willing. I owe her a great boon, as do you, I might add.”

“I think I owe her an apology, before the boon,” he admitted. The King of Asgard was not a title that let him breathe much, and admitting wrong-doing was hard, but he could see he had treated the Lady unfairly, and despite that, she saved what he held most dear.

“That you do, but I think the daughter of my heart will forgive you… if you cease behaving like a colicky bilgesnipe kit,” Frigga warned. That was her, harsh when needed, but always fair.
“Then tomorrow, I shall give her honors, and her mate, the Captain, for his help as well. Asgard shall pay its debts, and our land shall not be proven faithless.”

“Just be sure to ask what Lady Darcy wants, instead of bulling ahead like you know best. It’s been many years since they were last a frightened, superstitious group of unruly children to cling to what Asgard gave regardless of its own merit. I’m sure these heroes, these Avengers, have hopes and dreams we could not comprehend, as strange as we are to one another.”

“My Queen is ever wise,” Odin murmured into her shoulder. Frigga smiled indulgently.

“As the daughter of my soul would say, darn skippy I am.”

Odin groaned. Please Norns don’t let Frigga begin to copy Darcy Lewis’s speech, he’d willingly give his other eye, just not that.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Gnarly- dangerous and messy.
Buri the Undying- Odin's grandfather.

Notes:
Some lines lifted from Thor 2.

Current travel is uncommon in standard tasers, but a higher amperage and any direct contact with the blood stream can result in the shock applied to the opponent also hitting the person using the taser. It's super dangerous, do not attempt unless your life is at risk.

Weebles were a popular children's toy in the nineties (and earlier, but they had a comeback in the 90's when Darcy would have seen them), and they were balanced such that they would always stand back up again when tipped over. The sales line was 'Weebles wobble, but they don't fall down." It's a very specialized reference.

Remember that almost all of Steve's section was happening in Darcy's body, so all those lines would be said by Kat Dennings, pretending to be Chris Evans, pretending to be Steve Rogers possessing Darcy's body. It's funny to imagine.

Odin is having his first 'come to Jesus' sort of moment vis a vis his treatment and judgement of Midgard. It's a slow road but we'll get that head out of his ass eventually.

Frigga's side-scrying isn't at all canon, for Eddas or Marvel, but I wanted to work in how things could have gone (ie movie canon) so I gave her that power.

Teaser:
“ALL OFFENCE INTENDED,” Steve shouted back, crowding Odin, “but I’m not a goose-stepping fascist lackey and Loki earned a fair trial by his peers."
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

A meeting with the Court of Asgard has shocking consequences.

Chapter Notes

I'm going on vacation from this until Midterms and Spring Break are over, but have the latest chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Morning came with a mental shiver that shook Darcy awake, finally back in her own body thank god. They hadn’t run into that side effect before, although there had been a cousin of her Mom’s who got stuck in the late 1700’s after a run in with an early experiment with electricity for two weeks. Science nerds, they had no sense self-preservation.

Science nerds.

No self-preservation.

“Jane!”

“Huh?” Bucky mumbled into her armpit.

“How’s Jane?” she asked him, trying to stay calm. “They attacked because she was here, the creeps want the Aether and it’s inside my best friend. Bucky…”

“It’s alright,” he assured her, rubbing her back in circles. Steve snuffled into the other pillow and Darcy swiped the loose bit of hair that always fell across his eyes back. He’d start making noises about another haircut soon, but after what happened with Loki and the home bleach kit that gave him frosted tips, neither she nor Bucky trusted him with his own hair. “Jane is safe. She took a nap during the battle, actually. Sigyn says the physical effects of hosting are similar to pregnancy but without a baby.”

“And Malekith wants to steal Jane’s unborn murder-baby,” Darcy growled.

“Not going to happen, Doll,” Bucky told her. “Loki’s keeping watch now, since she’s supposed to be alone and the story we floated about his location was ‘must have skipped town’ because his absence was noted after the prison riot. In the morning, Thor will take her, and we can cycle in as needed. She also has Einherjar guards outside her doors. Trust me, I have assassinated plenty of people, I know how to block access.”

“Okay.” Darcy sighed and relaxed into his arms. “It should probably not be as comforting to me that you used to kill people as it is. Is that crazy?”

Bucky laughed. “You’ve got lots of things that could be called crazy going on here, Doll. Wanting
to keep your loved ones safe with extreme prejudice ain’t one. You’re the one who keeps egging Tony to build you a more lethal taser, killing isn’t the problem you have with my past, and that’s good. I’d have more issues with the blood on my hands if you did care about that.”

“Dead bad guys can’t kill innocents, live bad guys will, if you don’t stop them,” Darcy pointed out. They traded sides on the deadly force argument like people in Musical Chairs traded seats, but they still got into it. Natasha, Clint and Steve would also get in on it too, and once they invited the rest of the team, only to learn that only Bruce ever actually bothered to argue that well for mercy. Tony was pretty bloodthirsty about his villains so far, and Pepper and Betty got derailed onto the ethics of different execution styles and the price of lye in five states. Darcy never brought up the game in front of the non-combatants again, it was too disturbing.

“Doll, I’m too tired to play this right now, I spent yesterday keyed up and I’m freaking over the fact that we’re now famous here. We got flowers delivered to us last night. Flowers. To the door. From someone on the gardening staff that I had to get Loki to verify as safe. I’m itching from the visibility.”

Darcy sighed. “Fine, go back to sleep, I’m up anyway, so I can start drafting statements in case we get hit with the Norse Deity of Paparazzos tomorrow.” Bucky kissed her quickly before brutally attacking the pillow with his face.

Preparations went swiftly, but so did the time and soon enough Darcy was brushing her hair back into the false tiara thing Frigga sent her to wear to the honors ceremony. She didn’t know what to expect from the sudden event, but she was picturing the end of A New Hope and wondering which one of them was Chewy. She really hoped it wasn’t her, she rocked the pewter colored satin and royal purple chiffon that built her slim halter gown and shoulder baring cape, because Asgard made capes a regular part of formal wear. Of course, next to Steve’s gold form-hugging silk proving that knowing he needed tight shirts was a universal fashion choice, and Bucky’s velvet indigo coat and black leather trousers somehow looking like a fantasy version of his Howlies uniform, Darcy wasn’t sure any of them were Chewy.

She caught the eye of an attendant, a familiarly vulpine face framed by dark curls, and smiled. Her brother smiled back before leaning in to offer some crusty general a drink and a glance at his cleavage. Darcy smothered a chuckle as the old guy tried not to scope out his waitress. She’d worked at a diner for a bit and knew the look, Loki was going to get the Asgard version of a twenty-five percent tip.

The hall cheered as Odin sat in his throne, mostly demolished though it was. He quieted them and Thor beckoned them up to the dais.

“Odin All-Father, I would make known to you three great heroes,” he boomed, and Darcy suddenly got his all-caps way of speaking during press conferences, the reverb in here demanded that specific tone. “James Barnes, called Bucky, who answered the call of his people in dire times, paid greatly for his bravery, and fought durance vile to return to his family. Steven Rogers, who overcame his own body to follow his heart to the battlefield and is hailed as the Captain of his homeland. Darcy Lewis, my Lightning Sister, who fought beside them both and has tied her fate to the defending of all.”

“Welcome, heroes of Midgard,” Odin boomed back at them, his stiff posture radiating discomfort. “Though newly come to our Halls, you have provided a great service to Asgard. I would give you honor and tribute for your sacrifices on our behalf.”

Darcy smothered a scoff, she knew he didn’t care about her sacrifices, he cared about looking like an ungrateful loser if he didn’t offer. But she also knew her lines, and she dipped her head slightly in
“King Odin, we only did for Asgard as we would for any land that came under attack while we could defend it. Our oaths are to the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness of all who deal fairly with us. Which is why I must decline any honor or tribute for something I do not see as a sacrifice.”

The hall buzzed with shocked voices.

“Lady Darcy,” Frigga said gently. “Perhaps you don’t understand how much it means on Asgard that you had to strike yourself with a weapon to protect me. You were severely hurt to save me from death.”

“No offence meant, Queen Frigga,” she started, resisting the urge to tug her choker-style halter neck. Awkward, thy name is Darcy Lewis. Might as well go all in. Heimdal could only plead injury so long before being asked to report where Loki went. “But I did not save you for yourself. Or for Asgard. I saved you because you matter to my brothers. And for them, for Thor the Thunderer, Prince of the Storm, and Loki Silvertongue, Prince of Chaos, I would do anything. I do mean anything. If you want to thank me for zapping Malekith with lightning in a box, you can do it by forgiving me the things I have done and will do for my brothers.”

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The buzz became a roar and Odin leapt up to bang his spear on the ground, silencing everyone. Steve watched as Darcy met his eye levelly, and he and Bucky did the same. Thor had stepped down from the stairs he had stood on to edge closer to Steve and Fandral had moved forward to subtly cover Bucky’s flank. The three Midgardians were hyper-aware of the fight hanging in potentia around them. From frying pan to fire to gunpowder storage, Steve thought a bit hysterically.

“What do you mean?” Odin asked roughly.

“I mean, you can’t be trusted with the brother of my heart, All-Father,” Darcy said, practically spitting his appellation at him. “So I took him back. Don’t kill me for freeing my kin from unjust imprisonment, and any debt you feel for the continued life of your lady love is paid. If you need me to dumb it down, I can. You break your toys so I’m taking mine and going home, finders keepers losers weepers. Good luck stopping me if you decide not to pay your debts, I have more allies than you want to find out about.”

“He was tried, and found guilty of murder, invasion, colluding with dangerous forces…”

“You mean when he was brainwashed? Buddy, I have been brainwashed,” Bucky snapped. “You get unpredictable when you’ve been tortured and broken, and all three of us know that. What you do after you have a chance to run is what matters. Darcy juiced his brain to free him and he threw the damn fight! He helped protect our friend when I brought enemies to our door. He’s paid his dues to Earth.”

“MIDGARD DOES NOT SET THE LAW OF ASGARD!” Odin shouted. “I AM THE LAW OF ASGARD!”

“All offence intended,” Steve shouted back, rage clawing in his chest, stepping forward to crowd Odin, “but I’m not a goose-stepping fascist lackey and Loki earned a fair trial by his peers. I didn’t die for a hero like him to get treated like this. I know none of you trust him further than you can throw a Sherman tank, but I do trust him and he’s never once given me reason not to. I trusted him with Darcy’s safety when I was most scared to leave her side, I trusted him to protect us as we fought monsters from my past that still give me nightmares, I trust him with my kids.”
Darcy blinked. “Steve, he hasn’t met ours yet. Harley controls technology like it’s breathing and Zoe near about killed her birth mother with evil plants.”

“Yeah, and Loki handled the two most insanely capable children I’ve ever met just fine. Our kids are talented, sure, Ciara’s kids are basically acting agents and they’re five years old. A full garrison of highly trained special operations forces routinely loses to the Harrow boys, and they think Loki’s the pips, so he cannot be that bad at handling kids.”

“Fair,” she allowed. Looking back to Odin, she saw the tic back in full force. “Look, if you don’t like it, we can go. It’s not like Asgard has much to offer us anyway, so I wouldn’t put you on the diplomatically valuable list of people not to steal from. Deport us, I dare you.”

“Asgard is the Realm Eternal, we guard all of the Nine Realms, and you would break ties over a faithless trickster cast out by his own kin?” Darcy stepped forward, and Steve watched her dress changing, getting heavier and more armor-like. Magic was pouring in.

“I would seriously consider rephrasing that, Odin,” she said low and even, but her voice traveled in all its deadly and beautiful promise. “I already said I claim kinship. He is mine. I have killed men for less insult to people who are mine. Loki the Sky Walker is not faithless to those who keep faith with him, and like another Skywalker, his dark side is brought out by treachery and pain from trusted quarters. I’ve never feared that, because I am not an honorless, lying little bitch. Why does he scare you?”

They turned on Darcy’s mark, her bond flaring in Steve’s mind, guiding him to an almost perfect about face, more smooth than any he’d ever done on a parade ground.

“I will let Midgard pass its own judgements,” Odin said behind them, “but know that you will soon have to face Jotunheim if you still wish to defend him, and breaking ties with Asgard will not serve you well then.”

“He’s the long-lost, kidnapped, last blood heir to their throne,” she said flatly. “I’ll take my chances they might want to risk starting a line of succession battle in their home just to extradite him. And when has Asgard ever served me well? You won’t even help us when your past comes to roost in my friend. At this point, I think the issue is if Earth will choose to help Asgard when the Elves next attack.”

This time, they made it to the door.

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“I can’t believe I just defied the king,” Sif said, her voice uncommonly numb in Loki’s ears.

“Well, it wouldn’t be the first time,” he told her.

“But…”

“Mother did actually follow protocol, we just did it swiftly and quietly because everyone was still riled up from Thor taking things a bit farther than intended,” he told her. The look that crossed her face, of shame and surprise, told him she had neither known nor considered that possibility. “I don’t hold that against you Sif, I had been up to no good, just not in the way you thought. But you survived doing this before, you can survive it now. Moral injury hurts less the second time around.”

“Up until the time when it suddenly hurts worse. Mine was the twenty fifth kill as the Winter Soldier,” Bucky said from beside Darcy where he’d taken up a guard of the door. Sif hummed and turned to the stoic soldier. “Osaka, they wanted a businessman out of the way so that a friendlier
individual could take his spot on the board of Yashida Industries. I broke and they sent my daughter to extract me. As a punishment, I watched her enter danger when I couldn't. I know you want to comfort her, Loki, but just because she’s crossed a line before doesn’t mean it won’t hurt as much to cross it again. We need to leave, we can try to arrange asylum for them, but we should get off this rock.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Frigga said from the escape door. “Odin has finally taken the council of those without honor at stake and agreed to work out a treaty with these heroes of Midgard, and to free you into their custody. You may stay as long as you wish, although I hold no hopes you shall choose to remain by your mother’s side forever. Where next do you intend to go?”

Loki looked at the assembled group, then at Seidkonur Foster. “We could always go to Svartalfheim.”

“Isn’t that where the guy who wants the Aether lives?” Jane asked.

Loki smiled. “He does know how to remove it.”

“I’m going to hate this, aren’t I?” the Seidkonur sighed.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Einherjar- the elite Asgardian soldiers chosen as personal guards.
Paparazzos- tabloid reporters.
Chewy- Chewbacca the Wookie from Star Wars, large, hairy, and doesn't get a medal in the award ceremony in the first one.
All-caps- loud and over enunciated.
In potentia- potential, about to happen.
Juiced- shocked with electricity.
Goose-stepping- reference to Nazis.
The pips- great, amazing, fun.

Notes:
There were lots of electric experiments before the Franklin kite thing, but most of them were just as risky and all of them were needed to give us modern electric.

Darcy sometimes thinks in pop culture references, you pretty much have to have seen the first Star Wars movie, A New Hope, if you want to get that reference.

Loki has a female form he takes in the comics who is really freaking pretty, but almost always identifies with masculine pronouns, hence Darcy referring to Lady Loki here as 'he' and using other masculine terms. Because gender queer gods.

Steve has had it with Odin, Monarchy, and Asgard in general. He's really feeling the crunch of this culture being so close, having such great potential, and then just... failing. He's not really mad... he's just disappointed, which should be a clue to Odin that he needs to check himself before he wrecks himself.

Again, Darcy references Star Wars, this time the Prequel Trilogy, and what pushed Anikin Skywalker to become Vader. Loki's earned name in the Eddas was Sky Walker,
for his traveling ability and wide ranging journeys.

Lets face it, Jotunheim doesn't want Loki back, they can't afford it. Also, Earth has now surpassed Asgard in functionality, although I expect the Hero-Arms-Race that Darcy just kicked off to change that as people line up to "defend Asgard's honor" or whatever.

Loki is referring to the actions in Thor, some of which were in deleted scenes. He was properly made King, the coronation just happened to be fast and short.

Bucky is right, moral injury can scar up, it can also rip you open when you least expect it.

No Teaser today, I don't have enough of the next chapter written. My apologies.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Darcy says goodbye to Asgard, Thor reflects on family and the Battle of Svartalfheim, and Bucky leads people.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To JER, quadrad, MarauderHeir, UltraCute, minishadowssoul, angelofheaven, Jade01, SionnachOiche3, nemohana, Melissa Dixon, ValkyriePhoenix, tigrislilium, hhellcat, Joey99, Darylslover33, Shadows_of_Shemai, SerialObsessor (DlStar71), Beth_Mac, and Selene_Aduial.

Reminder, updates for this are Tuesday/Thursday.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy basically hated everything about this plan, but had yet to find something better. They were even splitting the party, a thing she normally warned vehemently against, but she knew tricking Malekith would require a small force. She was lagging behind her brothers as they boarded the boat that would sell the variant on the Wookie prisoner gag when Frigga stopped her.

“Daughter of my heart, something saddens you.”

“Yeah, mostly just worried. Both my brothers and my best friend are going into something close to mortal danger, my boyfriends are both having trauma crap hit them wrong, and to top it all off I think I may have almost caused an international incident of massive proportions. Life is stressful.”

A booming laugh made Darcy jump a bit. “You have a gift of understatement, Lady Darcy,” Odin told her. “Would that I could call such times as these merely stressful.”

“Well, it’s not as bad as fighting a world war, cohabiting brains of men I love as they die, and then being expected to work for a wizard woman. So just stressful. My bar for badness is so high it’s in orbit,” Darcy admitted, watching his face get thoughtful. “But that does mean I’m much better prepared to watch their backs. I won’t let your son get hurt.”

“No, I don’t think you will,” the god-king said. “I should apologize, I did not react to your loyalty to Loki… in a manner befitting a king. I was blind to the fact that such things come from a truth of the heart, and I do not have to share that truth with you to know it is well placed. I will not ask you to forgive me, but my doors are always open to you, and I know my queen would like to see those who love her sons more often.”

“Yes,” Darcy said, somewhat slack of jaw. “I can come by again. We should set up a better departure system, though. The bill for the bifrost scar in New York was way too high to do often. Maybe an embassy? I’ll ask Nat to butter up Victor for advice on starting one. Oh, and you said ‘those’ in the plural. I hope you’re okay with visiting redheads, because if Ciara finds out that was
the wording… well, her sons are basically natural disasters or acts of God and they ADORE their ‘Unca Loki’ to bits.”

“It has been too long since we had children in these halls,” Frigga said, cutting off whatever Odin was going to say. “The sisters of Loki and their children are always welcome in my home. And their husbands as well.”

“I don’t think Ciara and the twins’ Dad are married,” Darcy demurred, trying to deflect off the fact that no law on earth would validate her relationship with marriage. She’d checked. It sucked super hard that even with so many places recognizing gay marriage a two man polycule couldn’t get hitched.

“Regardless of this Ciara’s marriage or not, your husbands remain welcome, Lady Darcy,” Frigga insisted. “Am I not the Midgardian Goddess of Marriage? I know your hearts are true to each other and no other will drive you apart. The Norns themselves support this union in your gifts. If you require more than that, then after the convergence passes I will wed the three of you in any law-court or temple you wish, but you are wed in all ways that I can see.”

“Wow,” Darcy said. “That is a lot to unpack and I’m about to face death, destruction, chaos and bad shit, so let’s talk about this later. I need to get to a blasted plain to trick an ancient boogey man into saving my friend’s life. Later I guess.”

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Thor appreciated the chance to see his brother and sister bantering with each other. The mild teasing and banter set a scene of homey bliss that was at complete odds with the actual situation. He’d mentioned this cheer in the face of doom once, only to be told that was what made them family, not fair-weather friends. Jane was curled up at his side sleeping when the skiff hit the plains of Svartalfheim, and made an adorable mewing noise into his arm.

“Aww, she is so cute when she’s sleepy,” Darcy said gently. “Like a kitten or something.”

“I truly hate to do what I must,” Loki said quietly. “But the plan won’t work without it. Sister mine, do you have the amulet I gave you?”

“Of course. What does it do?” Darcy asked as she helped the half-asleep seidkonur to stand. “I assume you wouldn’t give me useless bling.”

“Norns, no. It is enchanted to reveal only that of the wearer she wishes to show. Think on who you were and how you felt while freeing me, and while reprimanding the All-Father. You will be seen as one who works against the regime of Asgard, and your actions to protect my mother will not be recalled.”

“Seriously?” their sister asked, far too pleased at the prospect. Thor groaned.

“Loki, my brother, please don’t encourage her. She’s reckless enough without your help.”

“Well, then I suppose all my ‘help’ is doing is protecting her from deadly consequences,” Loki shot back. “It’s not like you could save her in time if this goes horribly wrong.”

“What exactly are the odds this will go horribly wrong?”

Loki waved his hands in a measuring gesture. Darcy giggled and hugged them both. Jane sighed happily at the antics, and Thor decided to let them have their fun. He might not truly understand his siblings, but he loved them all the same.
The plan started unpleasantly enough to convince Malekith. Thor grit his teeth through the pain of his illusion-amputated hand as Loki gestured grandly.

“Malekith, I am Loki, of Jotunheim, and I bring you a gift! I ask only one thing in return, a good seat from which to watch Asgard burn.”

The Kursed from the cells turned to his master. “He is an enemy of Asgard, he was locked in a cell.”

“And the woman?”

“My sister,” Loki told them, and Darcy shot a flirtatious wink. “I wouldn’t, gentlemen. Jotun females are known for being… unpleasant bed partners to any with warm blood.”

“Positively frigid,” Darcy purred, and Thor shuddered for reasons aside from pain.

Malekith looked at him with a snarl. “Look at me.” Thor lifted his head defiantly. He watched his Jane rise into the air and begin to spin slowly. The pulsing red black of the Aether oozed out of her obscenely, subtly wrong in ways that defied explanation. Jane screamed and under the shrill pain Thor could hear voices as the twirling darkness lashed out to brush his face.

No.

We will destroy you all.

This is the oncoming of the end.

Doom and darkness. Pain and death.

Ragnarok, Thunderer. Too soon and with no hope of salvation. You doom the realms with your selfish need to keep the one who will die too soon anyway.

Say goodbye.

This day, the next, a hundred years is nothing. It’s a heartbeat. You’ll never be ready. The only woman whose love you prized will be snatched from you.

Thor screamed as the darkness pulled away from his face. “Loki, now!”

His brother spun the complex and difficult battle-magics that he now saw the skill of. Hands flashed and a thousand illusions descended on the Dark Elves. Thor shook free the illusion on his arm and summoned lightning into the writhing mass. Thor shook free the illusion on his arm and summoned lightning into the writhing mass. It froze and shattered like a dropped cup, scattering between the feet of his little lightning sister as she danced her deadly dance. Malekith screeched and the glassy shards crackled and flowed upward in a sickening twisted pattern that challenged the mind’s eye. The villain departed, leaving Thor and his siblings to defend themselves and the collapsed Lady Jane from the remaining foes.

Darcy screamed as the Kursed stabbed their brother, only to be sucked into one of his own weaponized portals. Thor and Jane knelt at his side, Jane rubbing Darcy’s back.

“No, no! Fool, you didn’t listen,” Thor wept.

“I know, I’m a fool. I’m a fool,” Loki admitted with gasping breaths.

“Stay with me. Stay!” Thor commanded.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry…” Loki’s words faded into babbled confessions of past wrongs,
going back too far for Thor to recall, covering sins as great as ruining the coronation and as minor as stealing sweets. Thor tried to soothe him, but Darcy pushed past him to pull up Loki’s tunic and affix a patch to his side.

“You can be sorry when you’re alive, brother bear,” she chided. “Come on, we can fix this, but we have to go. Stand up, there you are,” she encouraged as she and Jane locked arms under his arms and around his back. “Deep breaths, Loki, you can do it.”

“Heimdal, he needs a doctor!” Jane cried out.

“My love, that wound…” Thor began.

“Isn’t going to be healed on Asgard,” Loki finished. “They wouldn’t know what to do with my physiology, or how to heal an injury like that. Asgardians are so rarely injured, something like this means death.”

“I’m going to be talking with you about that later,” Jane said. “Heimdal, can you send us to Earth?”

The song of the bifrost cut off any complaint he could have thought to make.

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Bucky had whipped into motion the second his feet hit Earth soil again. His phone was sending mass texts and he was giving orders to the SHIELD and HERO agents on the ground at the bifrost scar before even clearing the damaged area.

“You and you, get together with Lady Sigyn about evacuation and treatment zones, you and you, you’re with Lady Sif about her brother’s predictions for avenues of attack, you three, you’ll be comparing notes with Fandral and Volstagg about tactical advantages. I want Samms and Jones from Wales brought in, I like them in a pinch and things are getting pinchy right now.”

“Sir?” a fresh faced young woman asked.

“Apologies,” Bucky said. “Sigyn is the blonde woman, Sif is the brunette, Robin Hood and Little John there are Fandral and Volstagg. We’re expecting uninvited company.”

“Another invasion?” Her lip trembled as he saw her pull up strength from within. “Right. Well, then. Halsey, contact MI13, tell Wisdom we’ve got incoming weirdnesses. Dromore, on the phone with Buckingham, the Queen will want to know.”

“Tell Lizzie that Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers are very sorry this is probably going to hit her turf,” Bucky said, reaching over to slap Steve’s head for snickering. “If you use the name Lizzie, she’ll know it’s really us. I’m expecting incoming from the Falsworths, too. They’ll be on our side, they just happen to be the closest Legacy family. The code phrase is “As always, Pinky is a loon” if you need to check ‘em.”

“Uh… yes sir.” The agent moved off and he returned to typing on his phone.

“I’ve got Stark and Pepper coming in, Bruce and Betty are staying put though,” Steve told him.

“I got Pauk and Barton agreeing to come in. Skye said she’d have to clear it with Coulson, but they should be by for clean-up at least.”

“That’s good. How are we doing on alternate flyers? Stark and Thor are good heavy hitters, but we could use some air cover.”
“I can call the school, see if the kiddo’s teachers can spare anyone,” Bucky offered.

“Mm,” Steve agreed. “I’ll call Sam, too. He’s good at the small fast strikes. We should also see if Rhodes is available.”

Bucky nodded, only to spot the pale and bloodless look cross the face of a new agent, a young man this time. “What?”

“How many people are you calling?”

“All of them?” Bucky answered hesitantly. “What do you think we’d have done in New York if there hadn’t been a time crunch? More guys on your side means less chance the other side wins. Trust me, we don’t like doing the small force impossible odds thing. We will, but that’s how Stevie here gets in trouble.” He was about to say more when the light of the bifrost descended.

“I NEED A MEDIC!” Darcy bellowed over the milling agents. Loki hung sort of half on his own feet from her arms and Jane’s. Bright green eyes were shadowed and slate-colored. His normally animated hands fell limply at his side.

“What are you waiting for?” he asked the doubting agent. “Find me a goddamn medic!”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Wookie prisoner gag- the trick of "bringing someone in" to infiltrate.
Polycule- one of many terms for a multi-partner romance. Like a couple, but with more than two people.
Kursed- the technical term for the big transformed monster guy on Malekith's team.
Frigid- very cold, also not liking/being good at sex.
MI13- the Marvel British Weird Shit Division.

Notes:
The Victor she'll ask Nat about is Victor Von Doom. Yes, Nat and Darcy are on a first name basis with Dr. Doom. Yes, this worries people. No, they don't care.

The politics of polyamory are complex and at this point while I know of countries that will marry an MFF set, I do not know of any that will marry an MFM set. Frigga however can pull rank as the Norse Deity of Marriage.

The amulet Loki gives Darcy isn't actually a disguise amulet, it's more of a filter to hide what you don't want known. Darcy is an enemy of Odin's more bullshit policies, and that will show. That Darcy likes Frigga won't.

Lines taken from Thor: The Dark World for the Loki/Malekith scene, the Loki/Thor scene, and some for what the Aether tells Thor.

In this canon Loki really does get stabbed (I'm not sure if he did in canon and made it look worse, or if he faked it entirely) because there is no reason for him to fake his death, but I love that last ditch portal move he pulls. He's not totally down, but the injury in canon was bad enough that supposedly advanced Asgard-raised boys Thor and Loki both act like it'd be fatal, so I'm going to say it should have been, but Darcy is out-
stubborn-ing Death again.

In the comics, Sif is Heimdall's sister. Ignoring what the parents looked like to make both Jaime Alexander and Idris Elba, that's true here too.

Samms and Jones were the ex-pat Welshmen who impress Darcy back in the SquidGate event.

Pete Wisdom is a British mutant who runs MI13. He's a shit and I love him, you have no idea how happy I am to bring him in.

Bucky will basically always call Queen Elizabeth "Lizzie Windsor", see Out of Body chapter 1 for why.

Falsworth once recruited "Pinky" Pinkerton to fly a mission or five with the Howlies, and called him "an absolute loon, but good at his job" which is where the Falsworth-Pinkerton family gets their all-good call sign. I headcanon that post-war, Pinky married Monty's sister, so the two families are one Legacy.

Quick reminder, the Avenger Kids (Zoe and Harley Keener) go to Xavier's.

Teaser:

"You have the full support of the Crown in this matter. Protect Our country, Miss Lewis."
"Will do, Ma'am. And in the field? It's Lieutenant."
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Darcy waits for news, talks to a Queen and prepares for battle.
Steve uses his strategic genius and meets Pete Wisdom.
Bucky helps with pre-battle jitters.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Snowecat, ValkyriePhoenix, nemohana, Beth_Mac, quadrad, HellKat, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, halfelf87, JER, Maedae84, Joey99, angelofheaven, hafizatulsufiahyaacob, Selene_Aduial, Shadows_of_Shemai, ClockWeasel, Tsita, SionnachOiche3, kikistimi, and MarauderHeir.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy paced outside the OR SHIELD had set up specifically for Loki. Dr. Hank McCoy of the X-Men had told her it wasn’t his first time going into a surgery with no guarantee of the layout, but at least Loki wasn’t going to explode if they put him in an MRI.

That wasn’t quite as reassuring as it was intended to be, but at least he didn’t sugar coat it. Three hours in with McCoy using Sigyn as his expert nurse, and Darcy was wearing a path in the tile.
She’d shooed Bucky and Steve out to cover defenses, especially as they now had more than a strong guess and Heimdal’s recommendation to tell them Earth was yet again a ground zero. Jane had patted Thor’s arm and called Erik on the way out of the waiting room, opening with “I’m gonna need everything you got on this. All the work you’ve been doing on gravimetric anomalies, everything.” So Darcy knew that progress was being made outside the hospital, but that didn’t stop her from feeling trapped in inaction.

“Sister, if he even lives to the night, it will be more than was expected… You are doing all you can, you have found great healers to treat Loki’s injury, you insisted we not give up hope. Why do you not keep some hope for yourself?”

“Because I have done everything I can. And now I wait, and I hate waiting. I’m not good at waiting,” she told him.

“Well, it’s good you don’t have to much longer,” Sigyn said from the door. “The damage was not as bad as we thought. In fact, I think if you had left him there he still would have survived. He’d be very unhappy with you, but he very well could have come home on his own power.”

“He was gut stabbed,” Darcy said bluntly.

“He was, but he wasn’t bleeding badly, and when Healer McCoy went in with those clever knives of light to remove the small shards of metal left behind, Loki’s body began to… crystallize. It became much more like that of a Jotun, and they survive massive damage quite easily. He’s sleeping now, the healers say that is normal with the potions of living death that they apply for surgery, and I expect
him to be back to his usual self by next Starsday.”

Thor muttered a thankful oath and Darcy blinked. “Starsday?”

“It is called Saturday here,” he explained, half to her and half to Sigyn. “A single week? Truly?”

“He will need to rest easy until then,” Sigyn cautioned, “but yes, to recover his Aesir form a week, perhaps less. It will go quicker if he can remain asleep, but he will require food. I’ve been told that if it becomes needful, nutrients can be given to him without his waking, as the chamber of the Odinsleep does, but I saw nothing like that. I think they plan to use needles of some kind, Healer McCoy was asking about skin density in Jotuns.”

Thor looked concerned and Darcy laughed and pushed up a sleeve to show the marks from her stay in the hospital during the War. “They’re talking about IV lines, which are perfectly safe. They’ll leave marks like this unless he heals better than I do, but they deliver water and saline and medicine and stuff to keep him alive until he wakes up. I know it sounds strange, but they are accepted as safe and effective.”

Sigyn got a curious look on her face as Thor looked a little green. Fortunately for the Prince, a harried Agent stepped in to wave Darcy over.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Uh, Ma’am, the uh… the Queen is on the line,” the slightly stuttering young woman told her, running a hand over frizzy black hair. “I can’t raise Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers is trying to co-ordinate local forces with SHIELD and the aliens…”

“So you came to get me,” Darcy finished for her. “You did the right thing Agent…”

“Pevensie, Ma’am. Agent Pevensie.”

“Like the Narnian royal family?”

“Don’t even ask about the books, Ma’am. Grandma Susan hates those things.”

“Fair enough, Steve hates the comic books about him, too. I’m good to take the call.” The agent handed her the phone and Darcy stepped into a janitorial closet for at least a semblance of privacy. “Morning Lizzie! This is Lewis, how can I help?”

“It’s afternoon, young lady, and I’m not sure who you think you’re speaking to.”

“Oh, sorry. I was with my brother in the hospital, I must have lost track of time. But I am fairly sure I am speaking with Lizzie Windsor, former mechanic and driver. You didn’t intimidate me when you hit ninety on a battlefield in a hot-wired Jeep with grease on your face, and you don’t intimidate me now. You scared the pants off me, but you didn’t intimidate me. Also, my current boss is a much more terrifying driver than you were, even if we did use your evacs as threats.”

There was a long pause. “I don’t recall an American woman on the front in that incident…”

“I was only partly present,” Darcy explained. “It’s okay, just treat me like you would any of the Howlies and we’ll be fine. Only… maybe don’t treat me like Dugan, I can’t afford his poker tab unless he paid it down since 45.”

“I suppose I can trust someone who knows about the Corporal’s debt. What’s this I’m hearing about aliens? We are not New York, alien invasions don’t happen here.”
“Sadly, they do now. I have my best scientists working on a prevention method and we brought in extra-terrestrial consultants to help us narrow down attack vectors. This time we can keep the damage down and clean-up easy, I promise. Unfortunately, according to the text I just got from my intern, the central focus of the attack is likely going to be Greenwich.”

“Oh what bloody nonsense,” Lizzie Windsor, Queen of England, swore into the phone. “What the devil do they want with Greenwich?”

“Strategic location for something called the Convergence, apparently. I can pull in up on my phone, give me a sec. Blah blah cosmic alignment, yada yada increase exponentially, something something eternal darkness, here it is! According to Jane, the walls between worlds will be almost non-existent. Physics is gonna go ballistic. Increase and decrease in gravity, spatial extrusions, whatever those are. Bottom line, the very fabric of reality is gonna be torn apart. If Malekith uses the Aether there, during the maybe seven minute window tomorrow, the nine realms are goners. If we can stop him, then the universe keeps spinning. I don’t know if you watch science fiction movies, but this would be a great time to say “we’re canceling the apocalypse” to a bunch of grim faced giant robot pilots.”

Lizzie laughed, and Darcy remembered the feral joy on the face of a young girl under the yellow-black slick of engine oil. “My dear, I can say that to far more than a roomful of pilots. You have the full support of the Crown in this matter. Protect Our country, Miss Lewis.”

“Will do, Ma’am. And in the field? It’s Lieutenant.”

Steve cracked his neck in a way that drove Bucky crazy, and eyed the emplacements. The SAS had loaned them several snipers that Bucky passed to Clint for deployment while he and Natasha vanished from the preparations of the main group. Steve held no illusions they weren’t also preparing, likely in some way that would take years off him, but he wished he had Buck’s eye for angles. He trusted Clint’s eyes in a fight, but he was used to working as the solo sniper. Ops and orders were two separate things.

“Captain,” a tall, thin British Intelligence officer said by way of greeting.

“Mr. Wisdom, glad you could join us. Looks to be a big one,” Steve replied.

“Indeed. You Americans never do anything by halves, do you?”

“Blame the Dark Elves, they’re the ones who decided on ‘eternal darkness’ as a goal and ‘the entire universe’ as a target. If it were going to be easy, we’d have let you stay at your office.” Steve sighed and turned back to the square. “The enemy has spaceflight capability, but the ships are clumsy. The big ones are maybe twice again as tall as that building, and laid out on a central vertical line, like a seedpod. We know the latitude and longitude of the weak spot, but not altitude. Exactly how attached are the people to that building there?”

“That’s the Old Royal Naval College’s chapel, designed by Christopher Wren. Dare I ask why you want to know?”

“It has a tower, it would make a good vantage for an RPG launcher if they stay high, but that sort of thing drew heavy fire on Asgard during the attack there. I’m not sure if we should risk it. The payoff might be minor and the risk is certainly going to be high.”

“We’ve survived blitzes before, Captain. I’ll put Mousabi on that one, she’s a good shot with heavy fire. Should we clear the river?”
Plans continued well into the evening, when Darcy and Bucky came by with cardboard containers of Indian food and the three worked out supply lines. Natasha followed shortly after with Tesco bags full of salty snacks, beers for the super soldiers and flavored sodas for herself and Darcy. Clint filtered in later with his phone to his ear as he discussed getting a dog with Laura. Sometime around eight, Stark showed up with Pepper on his arm and a briefcase with some kind of ordnance that made Bucky and Agent Rana Mousabi grin maniacally at each other in his hand.

“Thanks for the party invite, Rogers,” Stark said grandly, gesturing with his low-ball glass. If Steve couldn’t smell the metallic tang of the amber-colored nutrient drink, he’d have thought Tony was drunk. It certainly looked a lot like scotch or whiskey. “Pep’s been looking for a good debut. She got her suit figured out and everything. I’m still not sure of the colors…”

“I’m not wearing red and gold Tony, I’m a redhead, it’s not worth the struggle. Blue and silver is fine.”

“Yes!” Darcy crowed. “Another blue! We’ll outnumber the reds soon enough. Bets on the kids?”

“Darcy, they might not even want…” Bucky began, only to be interrupted by Tony.

“I can put a hundred on Harley going red, but only if he chooses to go hero. He might be support staff, and no shame in that. I’d be dead without Jarvis.”

“I’ll match that on Zoe using purple,” Clint added, scribbling in his notepad for bet keeping. “And of course the bets are only active if they choose to go into the cape and cowl side of things, no points off if they go Agent, support, or civilian. Any party found to be pressuring them to go hero forfeits the bet.”

“Bold, she’s a phytokenetic, most would say green would suit her powerset,” Natasha added. “I’ll put fifty in the Harley pot for him choosing a white metal accent. He’d look good in silver or platinum.”

Steve laughed and hugged his loves. Everything would work out, it had to. If only so the bets could be settled.

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Bucky got up bright and early to check the perimeter. The evacuation was taking far longer than he felt comfortable with, but at least the college was clear, and the boats had been moved out of the Greenwich area of the river. Half the effort had been moving the Cutty Sark, but the local agents assured him the old tea clipper needed to be saved. They were down to about 85 thousand civilians yet to be moved out to the temporary evac zones, a little over a third. The roads were empty, save for a few huddled watchmen. He’d started in on a deeply involved discussion on the merits of soil additives in home vegetable gardening with Samms when Darcy snuck up on him with fresh coffee and a kiss tinged with grease from her breakfast sandwich.

“Hey there Doll, when do we expect the hostiles?”

“Maybe an hour, Sif should be up, she has the information Heimdal gathered for us. You can ask her.”

Bucky nodded and took a sip. Black coffee with one sugar and a pinch of salt. He smiled into the cup. Darcy was too good to him, remembering that. “We’re set on the north edge of the CZ?”

“As long as nothing tries to pass Park Row,” she agreed, rocking on her heels. “Pepper is having pre-fight jitters and I had to derail Tony before he helped any more. You wanna go give her a pep
“What you did there, I see it,” he said, eyes narrowed. He watched the understanding of her own pun dawn on her face, and kissed her forehead after she slapped it. “I’ll go talk to her. Did she pick out a name yet, or is she going Tony’s route and letting the press name her?”

“She has a few lined up as better options if the press picks something horrible, but she’s honestly torn between Saffire, Rescue, and Iron Maiden.”

“Seriously? Iron Maiden?”

“I think it stayed on the list because she’s humoring Tony. It doesn’t really suit her power set, but she doesn’t want to upset him. He did make her armor, and so she kinda looks like she’s a female Iron Man, but it’s not her at all. I half hope the press comes up with something else that sticks.”

“Understandable. I’ll go over battle protocols with her. She’s heard them enough to have them bore her. There’s nothing that builds confidence like realizing your safety instructions are dull with how well you know them.”

He followed through on that threat and Pepper ended up leaving a scorched fist imprint on the hastily built plywood sheath put up to protect the windows of Trinity College as he ducked her irritation with his ploy. When the alarms sounded, she hit the ground running, and his spot in a window with his rifle gave him an excellent view of her darting through the clusters of alien soldiers. Blue metal glinted like the sapphire she’d considered naming herself for, and white flames trailed from her fists.

His mind cut out all the extraneous thoughts, and the steady aim, breath out, fire, re-aim took him away.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
OR- operating room.
MRI- magnetic resonance imaging chamber.
Clever knives of light- laser surgery.
Potions of living death- anesthesia.
Evacs- evacuations, escapes.
SAS- Special Air Service, a special forces unit of the British Army.
Ops and orders- Operations (doing the job) and Orders (telling others to do the job).
RPG- rocket propelled grenade.
Blitzes- bombings.
CZ- combat zone.

Notes:
Logan should NOT have gone in an MRI in the first X-Men, with his metal-plated bones an MRI would, if not kill him because healing factor, hurt him very badly.
Forever pissed by that scene.

IV lines and blood draws can both scar the skin, looking a bit like track marks. It's one of the better ways to show the only lasting results are minor to anyone concerned about the safety of needle-delivery for saline.
In my canon, Susan Pevensie did NOT forget/disregard Aslan and become a bimbo, she realized how much good she had yet to do here, and was recruited post-War by Peggy Carter into SHIELD as it formed. The books do exist, they were rather 'inspired by' but sold as fiction and Su is forever bitter how she got maligned in fiction. She adopted war orphans from several countries and has seven grand-kids.

I can't know for sure, but I'm reasonably sure you're not supposed to talk to the Queen this way. I also don't know if I got her anywhere near right, but I do hope I haven't offended with Darcy treating her like an old War buddy. Also, just in terms of the historical record, Elizabeth Windsor was a menace on wheels in WWII.

Darcy is referencing my favorite scene in a movie full of quotable gold, Pacific Rim.

Wisdom and Mousabi are both comic canon for agents of MI13. Wisdom is like a snarkier Phil Coulson and Mousabi is a hand-canon wielding bad-ass in a hijab.

I tried to make the layout of what the battlefield is make sense, but I've never been to that part of London. British readers feel free to request corrections.

Red is remarkably hit-or-miss when you've got red hair, so Pepper is wearing blue like Darcy. Thor and Tony have mainly-red looks, and Steve could go either way. Bucky and Nat wear closer-to-black, and Clint and Hulk wear purple, so now it's tied.

The Cutty Sark is a historic tea clipper that's on display permanently at a dry dock in Greenwich.

Salt can be used to cut the bitterness of coffee or bring out the sweetness of the added sugar without having to use as much. It's a cost-cutting habit that Bucky picked up in the Depression and never lost.

Saffire is pulled from the crossover universe with DC, where her alter ego is Madame Saffire, Rescue is the name her armor took in the Marvel comics, and I couldn't resist an Iron Maiden joke.

Teaser:

“My usual job doesn’t often let me just shoot the bastards. This is nice, simple, clean. And these have the courtesy actually stay dead.”
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

The Battle of Greenwich, or How Everyone Was Very Confused and Malekith Got His.

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jane was focused. Normally, she was a fairly focused person, her inability to remember meals and showering aside, which could be called a side effect of focus. This was different, intense in ways that scared her a little. She held a remote control for the gravimetric spikes that made the containment perimeter in her hand, and every inch of her was attuned to the fighters within.

“The Convergence will be in full effect in the next seven minutes,” Eric warned.

“That just means we have to keep Malekith busy for eight,” she told him and caressed the control. A squad of Elves screamed and vanished into a twist of reality.

“That could be smoother,” her father’s friend said, reaching into the pockets of his khaki and olive green Utili-Kilt to retrieve a note pad. “I think the sub-atomic analysis was off for how the bosons react to the charge.”

“I’d say it was more an over-reaction to the strange quark introduction,” Jane said, focusing the field on the path of a new warrior. “There’s more kick from the quantum de-tangler than we suspected.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” a blonde in a yellow friction-reduction suit said. Her pleasant British accent held a laugh. “Uncle Jamie said that might happen, but I must say it’s a rare treat. Are you going to be disappearing the fighters again? I don’t fancy travel that way.”

“I can aim around you,” Jane said. “Can you protect the spikes? We need them.”

The woman grinned, saluted, and then zipped off, with an actual sort of zipping sound and a pale golden blur trail. Tiny flames sprung from the grass in her wake as she darted from cluster to cluster, drawing fire away from the gravimetric spikes.

Thor shot up off the lawn suddenly and Jane cursed as some electrical interference from his flight knocked her signal out. Putting it down, she grabbed the taser and pressed her com-link. “My signal has lost connection and Thor went through a portal. Bad news, I can’t do anything about the ground troops. Good news, I know exactly where to put the missile when to hit Malekith in his Aether.
Agent Samms was actually a bit put out that he’d garnered the attention of an Avenger. It meant that at times, he and Agent Jones were taken from their normal billets in Holyhead and Cardiff and dropped smack in the middle of unpleasantness. You bean a man with a fry-pan one time… Honestly.

Muttering furiously, Samms loaded his gun with the back-up cartridge and continued firing. Meanwhile Jones was smiling placidly as he picked off stragglers.

“Why are you so cheerful?” Samms demanded.

“Because,” Jones replied, “my usual job doesn’t often let me just shoot the bastards. This is nice, simple, clean. And these have the courtesy actually stay dead,” he added cryptically.

“I’m in a bloody historical masterpiece, you sods!” Rana Mousabi yelled at the invaders as she dived out of the path of a blast. “Blast this!”

Her heavy fire-gun certification was getting a workout as she covered the air over Trinity College. Pausing to reload the rocket launcher had turned too difficult, but Stark brought out the fun toys and explosive rounds were just as effective. Of course, that had also lowered the resistance of the alien flyers to swooping in close to her perch and trying to pick her off. Which was annoying.

“Oh, bugger off,” she muttered, nailing a beast in it’s smooth, eerie mask. Her gun’s report was swallowed by the roar of fighter jets appearing far too low, and she thought she spotted a screaming, flail wielding, madman in a Mongolian-looking outfit dropping off the landing gear. “Bloody aliens.”

Sif snarled as she drove her sword into a Dark Elf’s chest. Fierce battle lust filled her as she dispatched her enemies and guarded her shield-kin’s backs. The Captain tapped her shoulder in warning, then cried some strange Midgardian battle cry of ‘batter up’ before tossing her weapon first at a weakened ship. Her blade cut a swath from the damaged hull and as she dropped free, the Man of Iron fired his gauntlet beams into the hole, dropping it to the ground beside her.

“NAT!” screamed the archer. “I think I made them mad!” Lady Natasha was busy, but Sif moved to intercept the archer’s pursuers.

“You are incorrigible,” she scolded as he hid at her back. “Where’s your honor as a warrior?”

“I traded it for survival in Budapest,” he said calmly, as if she hadn’t insulted him. “Besides, you and Nat are good at keeping them busy while I fix my reclaims.”

He moved out from behind her and fired once into the cluster, igniting an explosion that killed the Elves and left her face hot and tight. “I hope the Lady Natasha gets more use of you than this,” she muttered, flicking black hair out of her face. At least the color change had meant singed bits were hidden.

“She does,” he said, “and I thank God and Darcy Lewis every day for that. I love that woman. Look at her, isn’t she gorgeous?”
Sif glanced over to where the lady in question was wiping blood from her blade onto the tunic of a dispatched foe, and spitting pink-tinged saliva onto the grass. Mud smeared a cheek and the start of a sunrise colored her eyes. A bitter, ugly snarl broke her face as she dove at another target.

“Yes, she is a glory. Let us go earn you your place in her bed.”


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Darcy rounded a corner, aliens hot on her tail when an unexpected voice shouted “duck!” and she did. Blinking, she looked up at Ian, her intern, holding a gravity shifted car like a baseball bat and menacing the fallen Svartalfheimian warriors.

“Yes, that’s right, run home to mummy you invading scabs!” he shouted.

“Ian,” she said appreciatively.

“Darcy!” screamed Jane over the comms.

“Jane?”

“Doctor Selvig!” Ian shouted as the red-face physicist did a tuck and roll that was ill advised while wearing a war-kilt.

“Janet!” called Steve over the comms apropos of mostly nothing.

“Brad!” Bucky called back laughing something on the edge of a cackle and Darcy shrugged.

“Rocky!” she called out, and a number of people, both ally and enemy, got scared by scattered yet forceful shouts of “UGH!” from all directions.

“Janet!” Eric said by way of informing them he was alright.

“Okay, Doctor Scott,” Jane said calmly but with an edge. “I need focus. Darcy, can you get this thing into Malekith’s hands?”

Darcy squinted at the device. “Would his pants work? I can totally get into his pants.”

“Rephrase, Dollface, rephrase,” Bucky said dryly and Darcy blushed.

“Time to get to work!” Ian said far too gleefully.

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Thor held Malekith’s attention while his Lightning Sister used the shadows that she shared with their brother. It was difficult, blustering like he didn’t know the true stakes. He tried to roar like his heart wasn’t stopping as she tucked boxes of magic into the Dark Elf’s armor. He failed and froze when Malekith caught her by her neck.

“Let her go or you shall suffer a thousand deaths,” Thor promised, a chill, fell wind settling on his skin.

“The darkness returns, Asgardian. Have you come to witness the end of your universe? You think you can stop me? The Aether cannot be destroyed.”
“Says you,” Darcy croaked, pulling strong, thin fingers from her throat just enough to breathe. Thor felt ill when he recognized the faint lavender marks under the hand as bruises. How dare this wretch lay harming hands on the sister of Gods? How dare he try to destroy this world that gave such joy and light to even the most damaged and ill-used spirits? Thor roared loudly, and his voice seemed to amplify and bounce. A green ice spear sprouted from Malekith’s shoulder and Thor blinked. Beside him, tall and covered in armor-like ice, snarling past blue lips and glaring from orange eyes, his brother stood in accusation.

“The Aether may not be destroyed, it may be eternal,” Loki hissed. The sibilant threat underlying the words sent chills up Thor’s spine. “It may be, but you are not.”

“Jane, now!” Darcy screamed into her com from the ground. A horrible ripping sound accompanied the twisting of reality and Malekith’s body went one way, while his legs went another. Darcy’s hair was bound back, as she did for battle, but the little loose bits of black waved in the air like grim banners. She collapsed as the rushing pop signaled Malekith’s end.

“Darcy, no!” several people shouted at once. Thor and Loki rushed forward, but oddly it was Jane who reached her first. As the ship began to fall, Thor gathered his arms around his family, his sister and his beloved and his long estranged brother. If they would perish here, that would perish together. Suddenly, a rush of air and a sweeping sound disrupted these bitter ideas, as the falling ship vanished. A young lad, not seeming full-trained, glared at the groggy form of Darcy Lewis, waving a controlling box like the one Jane had dropped earlier.

“No dying,” he insisted primly. “Rule one of Darcy’s Intern Academy, nobody on the team may die. No exceptions, Lewis.”

“Ding ding ding,” his sister snarked from the ground. “We have a winner, give that intern a prize.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Utili-Kilt: a permanently sewn kilt (unlike a traditional kilt you wrap yourself) with cargo pockets.
Reclaims: reclaimed arrows, pulled from downed enemies. Clint has more arrowheads than arrow shafts in Avengers, so I’m saying here he retrieves the shafts and puts them back in use with his superquiver.
Sunrise: an antiquated term for a bruise or black eye.

Notes:
If you don't understand it, and it was Jane or Selvig saying it, odds are high I cribbed quantum physics, my apologies to Bose, Einstein, and the entire discipline.

The blonde with super speed is Jacqueline Falsworth, the great-niece of Monty of the Commandos (Uncle Jamie) and Percival "Pinky" Pinkerton's granddaughter. She uses the Falsworth name because they have ties within the nobility and is technically Lord Falsworth's (read Monty's) heir. In the comics she was a niece, and gained immortality from a run in with a vampire and a blood transfusion from a robot, but here she's a mutant because it's easier on me. Her code name is Spitfire.

Samms is my Human!AU version of Samwise Gamgee and would much rather be studying anomalous botany in the research station at Holyhead in Whales. Jones is Ianto.
Jones from Torchwood, here transplanted with the rest of the team (minus the alien time-travel aspects) into the SHIELD satellite station at Cardiff. Jack Harkness is still a Cassanova who both intrigues and irritates Ianto, only it wasn't Bad Wolf Rose who made him immortal. He's on the Index because of it.

Rana sees Hogun, who has hitched a ride back from Vanaheim with the RAF pilots who ended up there after a Convergence related teleport. He was irritated this nonsense interrupted his leave.

Steve and Sif did a fastball special, a la the X-Men, probably inspired by something Steve saw Piotr and Logan do, but which wasn't included for editorial reasons. Battle scenes can be hard for me, so I snagged a bunch from classic comic fights.

When Sif refers to a color change, that's related to a prank Loki pulled that left her bald, and when it grew back, her hair was black. Which is in the Eddas, the drunken ramblings of Asgard as told by the semi-literate Midgardian bards.

Clint and Sif agree, the deadly woman is the bestest woman, even if the bestest woman isn't dolled up pretty.

The shouting of names is pulled from a scene in Rocky Horror Picture Show, a bizarre cult film I won't even try to describe. It involves audience participation, part of which is responding to Rocky's name by yelling "UGH!" super loud.

Loki gets to come back at the last minute because reasons. Ditto unexpected badass Ian.

No teaser for next chapter because who even knows. I will give you this snippet from a Clintasha-centric side work I'm doing, to be posted later this week:

“Who breaks into someone’s home to eat pizza? Who throws out only part of the slice that hits a floor this dirty? And who in their right mind orders pizza with processed meat toppings in a neighborhood like this?”

"Aww futz,” the man said, shoulders slumping. “I thought it was vacant. All my intel said you weren’t going to be back until next week, and here I am setting up a sniper nest to eliminate a terrorist target. Talk about awkward.”
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Darcy goes to the palace to meet an old friend for the first time.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Shadows_of_Shemai, quadrad, minishadowsoul, ValkyriePhoenix, Beth_Mac, Maedae84, tsita, SionnachOiiche3, Snowecat, angelofheaven, hafizatulsufiahyaacob, TheBitchyWitchyOne, Selene_Aduial, Joey99, MarauderHeir, Dances_With_Vulcans, and Jade01.

Note: This is a one-segment chapter because it got too long. I figured nobody would complain about 2k+ of Darcy having lunch with Lizzie, but it seemed unnecessary to follow that with 2/3rds of a normal length chapter, and besides, I need to mix up the viewpoints for a bit anyway. Next chapter (to be posted on Tuesday) will focus on the Asgardians in the post-Battle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes


“Come on, conquering hero,” Bucky cajoled from one side of her. “You have a busy day now that you’ve been cleared. Lizzie wants to speak to you, Frigga sent down a reasonably sized chest of what we think is gold to start converting and Loki wants advice. You’re the only one who can do all that because you’re the only one all parties involved trust. Or trust to behave in a manner consistent with stated values,” he amended. “I’m pretty sure Odin is working on the trust thing. But he knows you wouldn’t hang Loki out to dry, and if Loki’s interests and the Asgardian Embassy’s interests are the same… you’ll protect it.”

“I hate being predictable,” Darcy groused, sitting up. “Can you two do my hair?”

“Sure thing, Angel,” Steve added. “Do you want down or up?”

Darcy shrugged. There was little they could do to make her look worse, considering the bandage on her cheek from where an unexpected bit of falling debris clipped her, the livid purple marks at her neck like a particularly gnarly neck tat, and the overall stress stamped on her face. She let them maneuver her into a chair, and brush out her hair. The two Brooklyn boys liked tending to this, she’d found. Bucky because he remembered his dad doing it for his mom, and Steve because he loved knowing the secrets behind women who rock it. Either way, she got really good vintage hair-dos for cheap and she got to have her hair messed with by hot men.

At some point she must have fallen asleep in the chair, because Bucky nudged her and when she opened her eyes, a peek-a-boo wave of black hid her bandage. “Huh,” she said, amazed that they made her look halfway human. “Veronica Lake, eat your heart out. Can you snag my war paints for me honey?”
“You want ‘drop dead gorgeous’ or ‘just drop dead’?” Steve asked from where her makeup bag had been propped open on a counter.

“First one, no need to scare people today and my hands are shaking too much to do the eyes on my no-bullshit look.” He passed her the smaller bag and she applied liner and lipstick, smoothing velvety red into the dry surface of her lips. A few brushes of navy on her eyes, topped with a sprinkle of silver highlight, and a few dabs of concealer, and she felt ready to get dressed. Fortunately, at some point during her recovery, someone had left Pepper and Tony’s Amex alone together in the fashion districts, and a lovely deep blue suit was waiting for her, complete with a silver metallic silk blouse with a tie neck she could use to cover most of the bruising. Silver flats followed, slipping neatly over seamed stockings.

“You had a hand in these, didn’t you?” she asked Bucky, one eyebrow up.

“Only tangentially,” he said, waving his hands in defense. “Steve picked ‘em because he’s a lil shit and he knew I like ‘em. He knows I’m going to have a hard time concentrating now.”

“You can suck it up, you dirty old man,” Steve teased, and Bucky tossed a shirt at him. Darcy laughed, and headed out into the living room of their apartment, where Skye had sacked out on the sofa after a late night reunion and injury check. The hacker was up, and puttering in the kitchen. Darcy scooted past her to pour coffee.

“So, what does Byzantine have you doing today?” she asked after a sip. Skye glared at her and made a grumble-y grunting sound. “Oh, not fully booted. Sorry.” Skye handed her a plate of Clint-style toast made in the oven, not the toaster, and Darcy figured that was forgiveness.

Food eaten and coffee drunk, Darcy stepped out into the hall, her phone out and synced to the SHIELD certified to-do list site that stored Agent schedules. Her day was booked.

Dialing a number and snagging Steve for a kiss before he headed out to help with cleanup, Darcy smiled. Smiling into the phone line helped her not decide to murder her assistant. Andy was a great guy, and she was happy that with her increased leadership and doctor mandated bed rest Fury had decided to give her someone to manage her time, but still.

“Andy, sweetheart, baby,” she cooed, like a stereotype of a Hollywood schmoozer. “I realize I am a superhero, but you do know I am not in fact super-powered, yes? Why do I see seven non-essential meetings on my calendar the day I am first allowed off of bed rest?”

“My apologies, Miss Lewis, but the reconstruction teams…” he began and Darcy silenced him.

“Have nothing to do with me. You tell them they talk to Bucky or they figure it out themselves. Ditto clean up and Steve. I’m on human cost and quality of living. If there’s a group complaining about not having wi-fi, I’m their girl, everyone else goes to their own team leader, even if they don’t like it.”

“Sergeant Barnes scares them, though, ma’am.”

“And? This is my problem because? I’m cancelling the meetings that should go to other people, if they bitch, tell them who they see for this is who they see. I’m not a babysitter. Do you have a car ready to take me to Buckingham?”

“Yes ma’am,” Andy said, rattling off the make, model, and license so Darcy knew she could trust the driver. She hung up in the spacious and luxe interior of the car. Sighing, she closed her eyes, and opened them again in the driveway of the palace.
“Thank you,” she murmured to the driver. The building gave off a feeling that she was small and insignificant, a feeling that compared to the might of this palace and those who lived here, Darcy Neora Bahrenburg-Lewis was nothing. It irritated her, but she brushed it off in favor of checking her lipstick in her phone’s selfie screen.

“The Queen will see you now,” a butler announced, and led her into a slightly smaller sun-filled room. The Queen of England sat at a table, stern eyes set in a soft face, wrinkles pulling lines around a mouth set like stone.

“Hi,” Darcy started, “I’m sure you have questions, and I figure I owe you answers. May I sit?”

“Certainly, do,” Lizzie said and Darcy flashed back to a quiet evening, an arm-wrestling contest and a bottle of Scotch. “You can start with how you knew about… Lizzie.”

“Well,” Darcy said, sitting uncomfortably in her chair. “It sounds nuts. It sounds like those awful little dime novels Bucky and Morita used to devour. Or a Doctor Who episode. But basically I’m a time traveling life saver. I swap out when death or permanent brokenness is about to happen to someone important, and I save their life. They stay in my body for a moment, while I pilot theirs, and when my work is over, we swap back. My assigned charges, by the grace of whatever cosmic entity chooses that, are Steve and Bucky. They are mine and I am theirs.”

“Oh?” Lizzie asked, one eyebrow climbing into her hair. “You went back to the War to… what, save them? Which time?”

“Fairly often. I had to spend my War in a hospital, because time sort of got mushy and I was pulling three or four missions a day at one point. I was the one who accidentally outed you. I thought you would have introduced yourself first and I was trying to cover as Steve. I taught you to hotwire a car.”

“Really? So all that about how he wasn’t a perfect soldier, but simply a good man?”

“He endorsed that message. He was sort of… beside me. We called doing that a ‘ride-along’ like if one of us was in a sidecar. I’m told by others like me that’s not actually supposed to be possible. The current theory is that when I swapped with him as a kid, neither of us knew what we could and couldn’t do, so the bond was more flexible.”

“You’ve been doing this since you were a child?” the Queen gasped. “What on Earth?”

“Eh,” Darcy shrugged. “Just since seventeen. You were only a year older when we met than I was when I first swapped with Steve. And it wasn’t until I was in graduate school that I hit the War. If I’d been signing up for a war in my own time, it would have been okay. Aside from hiding the super-power stuff, it was alright. Okay, not alright-alright, I mean ideally that war wouldn’t have ever been a thing and Hitler would have remained a mediocre painter, but considering it did happen, it was within reason for me to fight.”

“I think… I think I do recall you,” Lizzie said cautiously. “Sometimes Captain Rogers or Sergeant Barnes would be… unusual. The men acted as though it was normal, however. I assumed they were under a great deal of stress and should be excused whatever strangeness helped them survive. But that strangeness that helped them… it was you.”

“Exactly,” Darcy said gratefully. “Um, maybe don’t spread that around? Loose lips sink ships and I’m not a strong swimmer. Also, anyone who did try to vivisect me would have to go through my family, and that’s made of super-heroes, assassins, and gods. My dry-cleaner already needs therapy, let’s not make it worse on the poor guy.”
Liz laughed and rang a bell, which summoned a servant, who took their lunch order and returned with trays of food. It was ridiculously good, and their talk ranged from new movies to fast cars to the thing Jane did one time with a toaster, a paperclip, and a Ladies Home Journal magazine that got the two women banned from Wichita, Kansas. Sadly, she did eventually have to bring it around to the what the fuck and why the hell of the matter. Lizzie was less than pleased to hear that Loki, now known to her mainly as the blue skinned ice warrior from the Greenwich incident, was requesting to stay here both as a diplomat and as a potential political refugee.

“But he’s a bloody great hero!” she exclaimed.

“I know that, Liz, and you know that, and Thor knows that, and even if he’s still kind of messed up, Loki knows that. But the cultural narrative on Asgard is that Loki’s a fuck up who wrecks shit, from a race of fuck ups who wreck shit, and blah blah Jotuns, something something Dark Side. It’s dumb, but it affects things. I can’t fix it over night and he’ll never recover in that environment.”

“Well, he may certainly stay here. We’ll arrange an embassy, I think I can clear space out in the same area Norway has their embassy…”

“Oh, we already picked the area, it’s the best for the bifrost to get to and we want to keep the scarring down. I’m going to be converting Asgardian funds to regular human money later today and we’re sure we can outbid on that lot, it’s currently just an abandoned warehouse. I can pull up a map, just a sec.”

“Oh my,” Liz gasped, looking at the address and street map Darcy showed her. “It’s a bit downmarket, isn’t it?”

“Call it a public improvement and watch property value go up,” Darcy suggested. “Oh crud, is that the time? I’m so sorry, but I have a meeting with my brother.”

“Come again some time, this was delightful,” Lizzie said by way of dismissing Darcy. “I want you to meet my family some time, too. Georgie is so cute, but then he’s at that heart stealing age.”

“He’s your grandson, so I assume you mean literally all the ages?” Darcy joked. “Sure thing. We’re thinking of doing an extended Howlie Reunion, now that some of us can y’know, stop pretending to be dead. You can finally muscle that twenty franc debt off of Dugan, that’s what, like seventy dollars these days? I’ll be in touch.”

“I’d like that,” said the ruler of one of the most powerful countries in the world with a kind smile.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Peek-a-boo: a hairstyle made famous by Veronica Lake, it has a wave in front of part of the face.
Eat your heart out: a phrase meaning "I'm better than you."
War paints: a Darcy-ism for make-up.
Downmarket: cheap, not very nice.

Notes:
Darcy is still un-enhanced, except for possible improvements to her mind/swapping. Therefore, a certain amount of time would be needed for her to get better. I didn't want to write that part though, so this is a bit of a time jump to her first day back up and about.

Veronica Lake's hairstyle is great for hiding blemishes, and in this case injury. It's also fairly easy and really pretty. You can see the rest of Darcy's outfit here: http://www.polyvore.com/cgi/set?id=220015747

You can read the in-scene events of the first time Darcy met Lizzie in Out of Body Chapter 1.

Child soldiers are basically horrifying concepts to anyone with a soul, so Lizzie is of course very upset that Darcy may have been fighting a war too young. Darcy however knows she was older than Lizzie in that war. The current international standard is 18, although 16 and 17-year-olds have been known to slip through.

Lizzie is using polite, 1940's language to describe PTSD. Men sometimes got "strange" to deal with what they saw and did, and one simply didn't talk about that.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

A look at the Asgardian side of clean-up.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Snowecat, Beth_Mac, Shadows_of_Shemai, SionnachOiche3, angelofheaven, tsita, Snowdove30, minishadowsoul, hafizatulsufiahyaacob, biblioworm, Selene_Aduial, Maedae84, ValkyriePhoenix, Darylslover33, Dances_With_Vulcans, MarauderHeir, Joey99, warmfuzzydyke, Jade01, and hhhellcat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thor blinked as the bifrost’s song faded from his ears and the clouded city that his Jane had taken to became the only thing he could see. His father had wished him well, and given leave to take permanent home here as long as the people of Midgard welcomed him. His mother had given him a large chest of coin with which to set up the home of the Aesir on Midgard, and instructions to bring his brother and their sisters to see her sometime soon. Heimdal had clasped his arm and told him Sif wished to stay a while among the Midgardians, so she might be calling on her Prince to help her fit in. Volstagg and Hogun had both gone back to their families, with warm wishes to those staying, and Fandral had discovered that Midgardian women still enjoyed his prancing and was in no way to be dislodged from what his sister termed “the nightlife” anytime soon.

All should have been well, especially as his Jane had taken to requesting him to carry her things and talk to her about the stars, which he loved to do. However, something ate at his heart, something hard to define. He sought the wisdom of his brother, who had ever seen more than he did.

“Thor,” Loki said, lifting a piece of a building with strong blue arms, “you’re grieving. That’s all.”

“But I have lost nothing,” Thor protested. “All that I love is safe, all whom I love are happy. What cause for grief do I have?”

“You have lost much, brother,” Loki paused in his speech to place the stone in a receptacle. “It is all things I wished you’d lost earlier, and you will be the better for losing it, but you still lost it. You have lost what you were, lost your arrogant, reckless, prideful self. You have lost the peace and happiness you felt as Father’s favorite. You have lost the assurance that you need never leave home, never see as others do, never feel pain or sympathy. You have lost your childhood, Thor, and tis about time, too.”

“I… cannot say you are wrong, though it seems strange to miss that person. He was terrible.”

“Oh, you need not tell me, had I had to deal with him one more century…” Loki raised a brow, his blue Jotun form shifting back to his pale Aesir appearance.

“Why do you do that?” Thor asked. “There is no need to hide your true form, you know I do not
find it any more or less upsetting than what you wore so long.”

“There is no true form, Thor. There is only me. If I am blue and cold or pale and warm and dressed in green, if I look male or if I look female, it is still only ever me. This is not hiding, it is being efficient. Aesir bodies do not need the same things Jotun bodies do, and the other way too. I lift the large things with the stronger of the two, then rest with the one that best goes to buy food. I see the healing tents have gathered sustenance for the workers, would you join me?”

Thor nodded and went to the tent from which appetizing smells came. Several people he didn’t recognise but who must be well known by the people, if the reaction was a measure, gathered in a temporary cooking space.

“Oh my god, that pork is so raw a spider just tried to make it famous!” cried a man harshly. Thor blinked and assumed that it was a failure of All Speak. “Did you even try to chop these evenly?”

“He seems a bit harsh,” Loki muttered. A girl nearby caught the sound and turned to speak to them.

“That’s Gordon Ramsey, he’s like that, it’s his schtick, he berates chefs who aren’t up to his standards. But he’s super famous and he’s great with kids. I’m going to ask him for his autograph. I can’t believe he moved an episode of Hell’s Kitchen out here on short notice to raise funds for the relief. Or maybe I can, I hear that Pepper Potts knows him. She’s so awesome. She was awesome before she became a super-hera, of course, but now she’s totally extreme!”

“Lady Potts is indeed very awe inspiring,” Thor admitted. “I wish I could have been there for her when she received those powers, I would think that should be frightening, even for so strong a soul.”

“I think she was well enough taken care of,” Loki said gently. “You know the lengths our sister goes to for those she calls hers. Lady Pepper was in no danger, although I might pity the fool who thought to challenge them both.”

“Slow down there, Mr. T,” a familiar voice said, nudging in between them. “Aw, darn, I’m full but Gordon Ramsey is catering. Well, those are the kind of problems to have. How goes it?”

“Ohmigod!” squealed the girl. “The Lieu! You are so cool. With the flippy things and the electric gloves and the sneaky stuff! Will you sign my wallet? It was made by this artist on Etsy… she did a whole series of them, I got yours and Hulk’s.”

Darcy blinked like a confused owl and Thor laughed. “I too think she is ‘cool’ as you say, but my sister can be discomfited by attention.” He noticed Loki rubbing circles on Darcy’s back and sobered. “Sister?”

“I’m seen, I can’t move, I’ve been burned,” she said between ragged breaths. “I’ve been burned, oh, oh no. Bu-bucky, the devochki… oh god.”

“Peace,” Loki told her. “Your lovers are safe, your daughters are safe. No danger resides here that we cannot face. All will be well.”

Thor stepped away, guarding the two as Loki soothed Darcy. He smiled sadly at the now-troubled girl. “My sister has had to stay hidden for a long time. The lives of those she loves rested on it, and now the danger is past, she still reacts… unpredictably, to being seen. It is great bravery that allows her to fight at all, and none I should care to know would blame her for taking peace if she wished.”

“Oh,” the girl said soberly. “Does she want a fidget? I keep spares, I have a marble rolly boinks and a clicker switch cube, and I think I’ve got… yup, I have a fresh chewy bracelet.”
Thor didn’t know what the girl was talking about, but Loki spoke up for him. “How large is the marble?”

“It’s a smaller one. I use this kind when I’m in lines.”

“We’ll take that one. My thanks.” The girl handed his brother a ball the size of a cherry caged in a green woven shape like a tube with fluted ends. Darcy began rolling the ball from one end to the other and slowly relaxed. “Feeling here?” he asked their sister.

“Yeah, I think it was seeing an old friend, it set me up to snap after. I’m okay now. You wanted an autograph?” she asked the girl, who now looked somewhat suspicious.

“You got really close to a meltdown. You should go sit down and drink some water. You go sit, I’ll get you food.”

“I will stay with her,” Loki told Darcy and subtly shifted the weight of her to Thor. “To make sure there is nothing you don’t eat in it.”

Loki smiled amiably at the youth who had startled Darcy. It was not their fault that she held hidden injury, and every action after was taken with an eye to care. It was also not their fault that Darcy would need reassurance her food and drink wasn’t poisoned.

“I’m Kaydee, what’s your name?”

“I am Loki Od-- of Asgard. May I ask which terms to use for you? I’m as yet uncomfortable guessing on Midgard, you don’t wear your selves so obviously.”

“Oh, you can use she and her. I don’t mind he and him either, but people find she easier with me. Just don’t use ‘it’ please.”

“Of course. I use he and him, unless I’m in a gown, in which case, I’m still a he but I’m making trouble and don’t wish to be known. You were kind to my sister.”

“Is Lieu Asgardian?” Kaydee asked curiously.

“No, not anymore than I am. Adoption is a marvelous thing.”

“My brother is adopted!” Kaydee exclaimed. “He’s in the smart kid track at school. We think he’s going to get into Uni early. Luke is so cool, and nice. He can be a butt sometimes, but he’s a brother, I think they’re all like that. Daddy says he’s a gift, since his mum and dad gave him to us.”

Loki felt the words strike his heart. How different would life be if he’d had a family like that? “He’s a lucky boy then, to have such a sister. Sisters make everything much more fun. I have two. Darcy and Ciara.”

“She-are-a?” the girl tried.

“No, little one, Ciara. Try saying ‘I’d like to share a candy’ quickly and feel what ‘share a’ does in your mouth.”

The girl tried the exercise a few times and finally got it. Her smile lit the world. They reached the counter and retrieved plates of grilled meats and fruit sliced into appetizing shapes. A word in the ear of the grumpy cook and a quick nod over to where Thor was telling Darcy a joke, and two extra
plates appeared. As they sat with the two who’d stayed seated, a tall, slim boy with dark curly hair, so different from Kaydee’s red-tinged amber, came up.

“Kay, what have we said about bugging strangers?”

“They aren’t strange, Luke, they’re Darcy and Thor and Loki. I gave Darcy a fidget. You’re friends after you give someone a fidget. And Loki is a gift kid like you are, and Thor is telling me about the bilgesnipe that lives in the alley.”

“I didn’t know there were bilgesnipe here!” Thor boomed and Loki winced. Thor’s good cheer could get awkward.

“There aren’t any bilgesnipe species native to Midgard,” Loki told him. “That one must have showed up during the convergence. We can ask Heimdal to send it home when we get it out into a reasonably open space. It’s not healthy for what sounds to be an ice-bilgesnipe to try to live somewhere so warm.”

“But…” Thor turned large, sad eyes upon him.

“Uhhhgh,” Loki groaned. “No, Thor. You may not have a bilgesnipe pet on Midgard. If you can find a way to rig an extra dimensional doorway at home, you may keep one elsewhere, but it’s not good for them or for the realm to keep one here. Where would you even put it?”

“The Tower is fair large,” Thor suggested, but Loki could see the practicality breaking through the wide-eyed enthusiasm.

“Dude, Tony will straight up murder you,” Darcy chided. “We’re still working on convincing him to get a therapy dog. Alien pets are so very off limits. But... if you do get one, I want to get to play with it too.”

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Frigga smiled over her scrying pool and banished the image of her sons and daughter laughing with new friends. Her children would survive, quite possibly thrive even, on that strange world. Although she’d long thought Midgard primitive, and it still had a long ways to go to match the other realms in might, that world saw issues that should destroy her peers and found ways to keep going. They held such kindness in them, and such ingenuity. There were problems, sure, but her sons had heroic natures, they needed evils to fight or they became their own worst enemies.

“My Queen, how fare your travels,” Odin asked, his customary formality softening just a bit in the privacy of her workshop.

“They fare well, my husband. Our children will recover from all injury they’ve taken, given time. The Avengers provide them with a good place to mend old hurts and strengthen new resolves.”

“And in the process, we lose our heirs,” he groused.

“Odin, you above all know that they shall long outlast their current companions. And when they do lose them, to enemies or time, they shall return.” More importantly, they shall return whole…”

“And ready for the rigors of ruling Asgard.” Odin smiled at her. “Frigga, I know. They must rest and heal before taking the throne.”

“They? Not Thor?”
“I am only occasionally a fool, my love. Thor will never be able to rule wisely on his own, neither will Loki. As I could not rule without you. It seems far too much to hope that one of them will wed an Asgardian woman with the necessary counter-balance. However, they form an excellent counter-balance between them. Our laws state that the King may only rule beside one he loves, but they say nothing of what shape that love must take. Do not brothers also love each other?”

“After all these years,” Frigga said in teasing wonder, “my King has finally grown wise.”

Odin roared in laughter, and they began another merry chase to be ended with sweet kisses and tender embrace. Nearly dying had brought the life back to their marriage, Frigga thought, and that was as it should be.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Aesir: A more general term for both Asgardians.
Mr. T: an actor and retired professional wrestler known for the catch-phrase "I pity the fool"
The devochki: the girls.

Notes:
Grief can be over losing something you know on some level you needed to get rid of, like amputees often know that losing the part removed saved their life. It can also be over drastic change in your life, in both those cases, people are often resistant to learning it's a grief response.

Loki is gender-queer, essentially, except his code-switching also applies to his race. Thor, like many well-intentioned but uneducated family members, has a hard time accepting that Loki isn't "hiding" his "true self" by code-switching back to what was encouraged in child-hood.

The Gordon Ramsey line refers to Charlotte's Web, a story about a pig that is saved from being eaten by a spider spelling out hype in her web for him.

Darcy basically has PTSD, and while it doesn't always express as scopophobia (the phobia of being seen), it can. Other things can happen to bring those feelings forward more, increasing the chance of a meltdown or panic attack. Everyone near her reacts well to the problem.

Fidgets are useful little toys for self-stimulation and soothing. I tend to like the ones at Stimtastic, and the boinks is here: https://www.stimtastic.co/stim-toys/boinks-fidgets They're mostly marketed to people with autism, but are also useful for anxiety disorders and trauma.

Kaydee is also autistic, but not in the same ways Jane is. Jane's spectrum expresses as a near-crazy dedication to her career and mild dislike of people outside her circle, Kaydee collects autographs and can't control her excitement near people. Like they say, once you've met one person on the spectrum... you've met one person on the spectrum.

Luke is both gifted and adopted, and Kaydee sort of misheard one as being about the other, but in this case, her comparison of her brother to Loki is still accurate either way.
He's nominally responsible for her when they're out, hence him getting wigged about her new friends.

Bilgey the Bilgesnipe shows up in the Avengers Assemble cartoon, but usually only in the massive subspace pocket Thor connected to his room. He also appears in Dark World, particularly the post-credits scene where he chases pigeons.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

The Howling Commandos Reunion: You Must Be This Crazy To Ride This Ride.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Ye, Beth_Mac, angelofheaven, Snowecat, Selene_Aduial, Shadows_of_Shemai, hafizatulsufiahyaacob, ValkyriePhoenix, ClockWeasel, quadrad, TheBitchyWitchyOne, Notashamed, SionnachOiche3, Joey99, hhellcat, nemohana, Lumierelanuit, MarauderHeir, and kikistimi.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy’s boys helped with clean-up until the crews brought in decided that civilian help would start to be a hindrance, then switched to visiting hospitals and doing other things to keep up morale. She focused on pulling strings to get the embassy’s needs fast-tracked, as well as fielding calls from people who wanted more information on the Avengers. She busted a gut laughing when the media decided to market Pepper as Extreme, but she couldn’t deny that the picture of Pepper beating one Dark Elf grunt away from a piece of art with her arm fully on fire was definitely extreme. As things wrapped up and her current team-family went back to New York, Darcy started thinking of her previous team-family. She made a few calls and dragged most of the Howlies out of whatever corner they’d hidden in. Monty volunteered his estate, and a half dozen Legacies volunteered to arrange everything from caterers to party games.

Their reunion went well, if by well you meant ‘everyone except the sane people had fun’, which the Howlies all did. Jones and Dernier managed to start off with an argument they’d left off on twenty-five years back without blinking, which made the Legacy kids roll their eyes. Morita came, but refused to join the party proper, and so Tony intervened to give him a virtual tour of the latest Stark-tech being designed for proxy-travel. Monty was the host, since it was in Britain, and spent most of his time reassuring the staff that no, his friends would not be destroying the manor. Probably. Not by accident, anyway. Dugan and his wife Dorthea ran late after Dorthea accidentally challenged half a pub to arm-wrestling, but their grandson Desmond went ahead to tell the gathering so nobody worried much.

Darcy thoroughly enjoyed Dum-Dum picking her up and swinging her around, and getting to hug all the others. Meeting their wives was fun too, Tachi Morita was tiny and terrifying, and when Skye’s team showed up with Trip, she swooped in on Agent May like some kind of mother-badass fussing over her baby-badass.

“Is anyone else disturbed by this?” Skye asked cautiously.

“Nah,” Trip dismissed. “Mrs. Morita does that with her spy-lets. She’s got proteges in all the major agencies, and all of their kids get that same treatment. Who do you think taught May to speak Eyebrow and Maria Hill her super-glare? Tachi Morita is one of those women you don’t cross.”
“She’s not the one here you watch out for, though,” Jacqueline Falsworth-Pinkerton said past a glass of orange juice. “Mattieus looks perfectly fine, but he’s not. He’s the one who will get you snockered on champagne and take you shopping… you’ll wake up owning things with marabou trim and prints that should not exist.”

“I feel like there’s a story behind that,” Darcy murmured as she made the mental note that if possible, Dernier married the only man crazier than he was. They had amazing children, though. War orphans who took to their dad’s lessons in costume, subterfuge, sabotage and bombs like fish took to water. Arnaud’s son Michael was fabulously well connected, which Darcy approved of.

“I’m glad you like it,” he said of his file detailing all the connections and favors owed, which he’d been showing off when Darcy met him. “Grandpere always spoke so highly of yours…”

“Yours is on a different level, though,” Darcy reminded him. “Mine is a lot more of a family tree than a spiderweb. I track who I know who can and will do shit I need, just because I need it. You’re tracking who you know who can or can find someone who can do shit you need, for like forty seven reasons. I may have numbers, but you’ve got the infiltration down.”

“You are too kind,” he demurred, before going a bit pale, staring into the distance. “Oh dear. Emellia has found the fireworks stash. I can feel it. Pardon, but my twin sister is a danger to self and others, I’ll be back soon. I hope.”

Dum-Dum snorted as Michael darted off. “He’s a bit over-excitatable. His sister ain’t ever done anything my Darcy hasn’t. Your namesake should be getting here soon, he’s excited to meet you.”

“You named a kid after me?” Darcy asked, a bit shocked. The second generation had a few James’s, one or two Steve’s, but no Darcy’s so far. She’d thought that made sense, they’d never seen her, and although she felt she knew them well from the little more than a month she spent fighting beside them, it was much more spread out for them, and she hadn’t interacted with them much as herself.

“Well of course I did, Lieu. You were my favorite. Don’t tell Barnes,” he added, winking conspiratorially.

“Too late,” Bucky said behind him, making Dugan jump. “Lizzie just rolled up, so… good luck!”

“You’re a little bit evil,” Darcy told him as Dugan ran off. “I like it.”

Steve reveled in the extended family, but soon needed some space from all the people. He found his way to where Sawyer and Jones were playing Boule with a decent margin of quiet space and asked to join.

“Next game, Rogers,” Happy Sam said. “Jones and I have a running bet going that I intend to win.”

“You got that trophy over my cold dead body once and that’s the only way you’re ever gonna get it again,” Gabe insisted hotly.

“And to think,” Peggy said from her lawn chair, “I used to think you were the dramatic one. Over thirty years married to him and he still shocks me with that competitive streak.”

“You look good Peg,” Steve said with a smile.

“I look old,” she corrected. “But I earned that. It’s been a good life. I’ve had a lot of love in it, and a lot of good to do.”
“I’m glad you found a way to be happy, Peggy. I’m sorry I missed it.”

“Oh, well, it is just like you to be seventy years late to the reunion. We forgive you. I’m just sad you missed meeting Daniel and Angela. Dear people, I miss them terribly. You would have like Angie, she was very modern in ways I think you and the Lieu would approve of. And such an actress. Never made it big, but oh could she play a man like a Stradivarius. Never cared for her father though, Mr. Martinelli was… stuffy.”

“Wait,” Steve said, as the pieces fell into place. “Angie Martinelli? Little Angie M? I did know her, she was my first kiss!”

Peggy laughed, her eyes vanishing in folds of age and mirth. “Oh the look on your face. Steven, that really is priceless. Of course I knew Angie was an old friend of yours, she told me as soon as she found out I had worked in the SSR. It was something we bonded over. She and Rose from communications and I would all go out and get pie and coffee and talk about you.”

“I think I should probably be more scared of that idea than I am,” he admitted. “Although I now owe Bucky money, he was smart enough to bet that if you ever became friends with any of the women from our old neighborhood met, you’d end up taking over the world.”

“We didn’t take over the world.”

“You founded SHIELD, didn’t you? Seems close enough.”

“We did not take over the world, Steven. I promised Tachi and Dorthea I’d let the children do that. Sometimes it’s a good thing when I make friends.”

Steve grinned at her. “I’m glad you had a good life, Peggy. You deserved it. And hey, if Jones gets too competitive for you, feel free to come join us in our sinful and far too well appointed lifestyle. Darcy’d love to even the numbers of dames and fellas.”

“Oh!” shouted Jones from the sand patch. “Just cause I got my legs blown off doesn’t mean I can’t kick your ass. Hands off my spouse, you’ve already got two. Greedy.”

As the reunion wound down and most of the Legacies pled work obligations, Bucky managed to finagle time with Skye. He’d missed his littlest sister.

“You look pretty happy,” he noted.

“I am pretty happy. Life is good to me these days.”

“You also look like you haven’t fully adapted to having such a big family. You act like you’re on the outside looking in.”

“Hey, I was just here because Trip wanted back up when dealing with the cousins. I’m not actually a part of this crazy legacy mess,” she protested.

“Wanna change that?” he asked.

“How? I’m not marrying in, if that’s your thought. I need someone slightly more sane than most of my friends, and I will not find that here.”

Bucky laughed. She was adorable when she got obtuse. “I meant, how would you like to make this
family thing official, little sis? As a sister of a Howlie, you’d be a real part of this. No more outside looking in, no more feeling like we’d drop you if you mess up. You could be a Barnes.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m too old to be adopted,” she said hesitantly, but he could see the undisguised want in her eyes. She’d been starving for a family since she was old enough to know she was missing one, and now he was offering her one, no strings attached. Aside from the obvious fact they were nuts.

“No you aren’t,” he said, pulling out the folder Darcy and Phil had cooked up for him. “SHIELD has paperwork for that. This is the familial declaration form, I’ve already filled my part out. Then we have the formal next-of-kin statement, and the paperwork to change your name, if you want to. I thought you might like to have the Barnes name on a driver’s licence, but if you don’t, you don’t have to. It’s everything you need to make me your brother for all legal intents. Whadda ya say, kid? Will you be my sister?”

“You are a nerd,” she said with slightly more awe than mockery. “Nobody else proposes with paperwork, and nobody else proposes sibling-hood like it were marriage.”

“They should,” Bucky told her. “It’s not like it was any less of a life-impacting choice. I want Darcy and Steve to be with me as long as I live, and I want you to be there too. I value being your brother Skye, and I want to make it official.”

“Well, you’re a dork, but you’re my dork,” she sighed, taking the file and pulling a pen from behind her ear. “I’m certainly happy to ditch the other last name I had. Ugh, Poots. Why did I think taking their last name was reasonable?”

Bucky laughed and put an arm around his sister. “Skye Barnes has a good ring to it. Welcome to the family.”

Eventually, Jane’s work was done and the team could head out. They left behind a half-built embassy that promised to be a fully built embassy by the time Loki went back the next summer to run it, and massive fan-clubs for Loki, Fandral, and Sif. They brought with them the freshly notarized paperwork recognizing Bucky and Skye as siblings, and Bucky, Darcy, and Steve as married. Darcy opted for matching bracelets of the same gold-colored Asgardian metal that made the men’s rings, Bucky wore his ring on the right hand and Steve wore his on the left. It was odd and mismatched, but it worked for them. Much like the rest of their lives.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Snockered: very drunk.
Grandpere: Grandfather (in this case Dernier)

Notes:
The Legacy map is sort of a mess, but here’s a bit of a run down. Dugan and Dorthea married post war and have many children, the ones mentioned here being Desmond and Darcy (Darcy works SciDiv at SHIELD and likes explosions). Dernier and Mattieus were already living together when Dernier joined the war effort and afterward adopted many kids, most of whom have kids or grandkids by now, such as Michael (pronounced Michelle) and Emellia. Morita had an arranged marriage to Tachi set up post war and they had a slightly more reasonable number of children, which Tachi supplemented by
adopting every up-and-coming female badass Peggy and Dorthea hadn't already called
dibs on. Monty didn't get married, his sister married Percival 'Pinky' Pinkerton and their
kids inherited the Falsworth name and it's connected nobility. Jacqueline is actually his
niece, but she's got some mutant thing going on that makes her seem younger, as well as
giving her a variant on super speed. Trip is the son of a daughter from Jones' first
marriage, and Peggy married Daniel Sousa but they had an arrangement with Angie
Martinelli. After Daniel, Angie and Gabe's first wife all passed, Peggy and Gabe
hooked up at the 40th VE Day reunion in 85 and got married shortly after because life is
dangerous.

Boule is a game in France much like Bocce, and for a variety of social reasons is mostly
played by old men.

As a reminder, during the early days of HERO, Jones was a saboteur and lost his legs in
an explosion, during which time he had also faked his death.

Teaser:

“Like the mighty honey badger that is my spirit animal, I have become meme,” Darcy
intoned.
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Back in the States, Darcy and Company try to adjust to yet another new normal, Sif learns the sacred feminine art of Girls Night Out, and the trio has some much needed personal alone time. (Smut Warning)

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Snowecat, Darylslover33, ValkyriePhoenix, Notashamed, hafizatulsufiahyaacob, Shadows_of_Shemai, quadrad, Beth_Mac, SionnachOiche3, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, minishadowssoul, angelofheaven, nemohana, ClockWeasel, Joey99, tigrislilium, Jeanieeelopez, Melissa, tsita, aquadrop25, MarauderHeir, hhhellcat, Selene_Aduial, and QueenOfTheQuill.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy sighed heavily as she unpacked the last of her work shit. Accepting the title and paycheck of executive lab supervisor at Stark Industries seemed like a no-brainer in London, when her biggest problem was if Jane would end up bankrupting them. Managing scientists wasn’t that hard. Actually moving into the tower’s work-space and the flow of high-powered corporate science was yet another thing. So far, she’d established that her science skills were limited to explosions and computers to a group of upper-level Stark scientists, violated the company dress code during a minor fire hazard, and insulted one of the board members by informing him she was not his coffee bitch. Which, admittedly, Tony thought was hilarious and thus was not a super big hazard like it could have been, but did not speak highly of her people managing skills.

A knock on the door shook her out of her moping, and she looked up to see Ian. “Hey, Boss. D’you have a minute?”

“Ian, good to see you. Yes, come in,” Darcy said gratefully. “How’s tricks?”

“They’re good,” he said with a smile. “I heard from the assistant office chatter that you’d had a run in earlier with the faulty bunsen on 52. I wanted to make sure you were doing all right.”

“Ugh, I hate the rumor mill,” she groaned, tapping her forehead on her desk. “I will never make it in the world of science not done with junk.”

“Actually, you’ve been compared to the Mythbusters, the Top Gear team, and MacGyver,” Ian told her. “The assistants love you, your safety rant has gone viral on the SI intranet.”

“Of course it did,” she sighed. “I had my shirt off because I needed to smother the flames on Doctor Bryer’s lab coat. Any video of me shirtless will go viral.”

“You had your shirt off?” her old intern asked. “I wondered why nobody seemed to have the unaltered footage. The viral thing was your rant itself, everyone quite appreciated that you were
taking safety outside the lab into account. There are memes.”

“Memes?” Darcy asked, shocked. Ian pulled out his phone and brought a few up. Her internal photo had been cropped to remove the bland blue background of the ID photo booth and superimposed on a pinwheel of blue and grey. White letters with black edges proclaimed “NO MAD SCIENCE IN MAJOR METROPOLITAN AREAS” and “IF IT MAKES TONY CACKLE OR PEPPER SIGH: YOU MAY NOT DO IT”.

She smiled, the first feeling of actual confidence in her job unfolding like a flower in her chest.

“That’s just the ones from the past few minutes,” Ian admitted. “The programming department has an archive of these things started in case management cracks down on meming on company time and wipes the internal drives. I thought you might not mind them, but I’m not saying no to the archive idea, either.”

“Like the mighty honey badger that is my spirit animal, I have become meme,” Darcy intoned. “I’m cool with it if it cuts down on lab death. How did you know i needed to see this?”

“You look all cool and confident and good at everything,” he explained. “I’ve found that means the chance of imposter syndrome is fairly high, and it’s your first day at a new job. Do you remember my first day as your intern?”

Darcy laughed. “Of course I do, I thought we’d broken you. Jane wandered through talking big math to Eric, and she hadn’t noticed his pantslessness, and on top of that, Bucky decided to be a small child licking the cookie so nobody else would eat it. I was doing all I could to keep him from literally or figuratively writing ‘property of Bucky Barnes’ on my forehead. Then Steve showed up and you hadn’t known about the triad, so it made your already stressed brain go a bit… explodey. What, is this the ‘it could be worse’ talk?”

“No,” Ian said, standing. “It’s the ‘a wise woman once said’ talk. Because I honestly remember very little of that. I remember feeling like I was drowning, trying so hard not to reveal that big, nasty secret that I had no clue what to do, when you said the best thing I’ve ever heard. You looked me dead in the eye and said ‘I don’t know, let’s find out’ and everything made sense again. You weren’t the impossible goddess of destruction, Jane wasn’t a prophesying oracle at Delphi, Eric wasn’t the Buddha at the side of the road, Bucky wasn’t actually Death made flesh. You were scientists and artists and mechanics and most of all, you were people. I needed that, and today, you needed to hear that these people are not somehow better than you are. They aren’t miracles of function and form, they’re nerds. And Darcy Lewis can handle some nerds.”

“Hiring you was my best professional choice ever,” Darcy said, standing to hug him. “Go kick Science’s ass, Intern.”

“Will do, Boss. Will abso-bloody-lutely do.”

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The Lady Sif was enjoying her time on Midgard. The warriors that Prince Thor had fallen in with were pleasing company, and it was… nice to spend time among other women of martial leanings. The warriors back home were enjoyable sparring partners, but they could never fully grasp that Sif was a woman who wished to be a warrior, not a man whose body did not quite match his soul. She was learning to start enjoy simple, feminine pleasures as well as those found on the fields of honor.

The Lady Natasha and the Lady Potts were taking this education quite seriously. So far, she’d had every inch of her body massaged by generous and giving artists of the spa, her hair washed and conditioned with sweet smelling creams and given a trim to cut the scorches into a style, and her face
coated in a mask of avocado and charcoal to cleanse it. Now, she sat in a raised, throne like chair while more artists of the spa rubbed creams into her hands and feet and prepared to color her nails with lacquer. Next to her, Lady Natasha was sipping at a glass of water with cucumbers suspended between ice cubes and browsing a flimsy sheaf of glossy parchment for gossip.

“Someone needs to get Lawrence a keeper, that poor girl is a walking hazard,” Natasha muttered.

“Hush, Natasha, we’re not all trained from infancy to be graceful,” Pepper chided. Her choice had been to be wrapped in more mud and seaweed, which cocooned her like some alien life-form approaching maturity. “And Jennifer is a perfectly lovely woman when you get to know her.”

“Oh, I’m sure she is,” Natasha returned, “that’s why I want to give her a keeper, she’s made a huge target of herself and it concerns me.”

“Who is this Lady Jennifer?” Sif asked.

“Jennifer Lawrence,” Natasha said, raising the glossy paper to show Sif a picture of a woman in white falling on some short stairs. “She’s an actress, but at an award ceremony she tripped while going to get hers. It’s mortifying.”

“I thought she played it off fairly well,” Pepper countered. “The audience seemed to appreciate the humor and it’s not like we’ve never had any other disasters happen at shows. You’re worrying too much Natasha.”

“Are you friends with this Jennifer Lawrence?” Sif asked, trying to stay polite in the face of shifting customs of lands not her own.

“No,” Natasha laughed. “I just like reading about people who are foolish enough to become famous. I find looking at those who stand in spotlights willingly to be a fun pastime, like going to a zoo, without many of the ethical questions.”

“This custom seems… strange,” Sif noted carefully.

“Well, welcome to Earth,” Lady Pepper told her. “We’re all a little strange, but we make it work for us. After this, who wants to go out for pina coladas? There’s this delicious new beach bar in Malibu I’ve been wanting to take you all to. I can’t go with Tony. One, I’m trying not to encourage another bender, and two, the air there tastes like coconut and he still has trouble with that.”

“With coconut?” Sif asked. She quite like the tropical Midgardian fruit, it would seem a shame for the Man of Iron to go without it. “Is he allergic?”

“No, it’s just not a taste he likes,” Lady Pepper informed her. “There was an issue with one of the older models of arc reactor, and one of the indicators was coconut flavor showing up randomly. He can eat it, he did eat it once before we got everyone filled in on food preferences and Bruce cooked with it. I prefer he not eat it because later that night I found him sitting by the pool in the mark seven which was mostly destroyed. It causes more problems than I like.”

“Should we be discussing Anthony’s soul wounds here?” Sif glanced uncomfortably at the artist now coating her toenails with the prearranged pink tint only a shade darker than her own nail beds. On Asgard, such servants would be implicitly trusted, serving only their master or mistress and kept in high esteem among their fellows to prevent treachery. These, however, served not Sif nor her friends, but the establishment where in they worked. It seemed barbaric, and far riskier than was wise, but she did not wish to offend.

“It’s not like people didn’t notice when he tried to commit suicide by terrorist,” Lady Pepper
muttered, but Lady Natasha shushed her.

“He feels horribly about that and you know it. Besides, what Sif asked and what you answered are different. You can trust Cheng Mei and her employees, I come here because they value privacy as much as I do. And most of the girls are trained in secret keeping.”

“How do you know this place, Nat?” Lady Pepper asked, sighing in pleasure as her attendant dabbed cooling gels onto her skin above the wrap. “You act like a regular, but it’s kind of out of character for you to know a spa owner by name.”

“Cheng Mei and I are old friends, with much in common,” Lady Natasha replied. “If you think on it, you’ll know how we met.”

After a minute of silence, Pepper gasped a bit. “Oh! But why haven’t you told Darcy?”

“Mama has no need to know, and Mei gets testy I had what she didn’t. She’s not my sister, she’s Chinese for God’s sake. I know you aren’t usually this dense, Pepper.”

“Oh, but I thought… oh wait… right, sorry.” Lady Pepper kept her revelation to herself, and Sif thought she caught the artist smiling, but it faded out swiftly. Whatever the connection was, Lady Natasha was known for her suspicious and careful nature, and she’d said to speak with ease, so Sif would.

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Bucky was glad to get Darcy back from the insanity of first the post-Convergence clean up, then the Howlie reunion, then her new day job, and lastly, organizing the Asgardian contingent ambassadorial education. He’d never thought that a lack of knowledge of such cultural idioms as microwave popcorn or the seven ways to generically refer to carbonated beverages could screw up a national relationship, but what did he know? At least Darcy had brought in experts from various fields in political science to cover the gap instead of dedicating herself to it. She could, probably, but this way he actually got to enjoy his wife sometime before he started looking his age.

And she could enjoy trying to drive him crazy, it seemed.

“Woman, will you please, for the love of all things holy and good,” he begged, on his last ounce of patience, “get your sweet ass out here before Rogers shows up? I want to surprise him, not myself!”

“First I want to know what very creative pervert you ordered my outfit from!” she called from the walk-in closet off their bedroom. “So I can track them down and threaten bodily harm on them. Who in their right mind designs a bra like this?”

Bucky sighed. “Doll, it’s a recreation of a style that was around in the forties, I’m pretty sure the original designer is dead by now. You’ll look amazing no matter what, you know that, right?”

“If I’m going to look amazing either way, why am I bothering with the superkink look?” she retorted, and Bucky snorted his opinion on that sass. He stood, and went to drag her out of their closet, only to about half swallow his own damn tongue when the door opened on Darcy in a black and white tease of a confection. The tops of her creamy breasts peeked out from flat pleats of black silk, and an overlay of strips of thin and supple black suede over a cream colored cotton created the illusion that her breasts were held up by only the straps. Her hips were sheathed in cream, her inner thighs in black, and more criss-crossed strips of suede finished the look.

“Hnguh?” he said, and felt pretty good he was even that coherent.
“Seriously? I’ve worn more revealing outfits to the beach,” she complained. Bucky’s mind went blank as he fought down homicidal and primitive rage over the things he knew young men had likely thought about her. He knew because he was also thinking them, but logic wasn’t his friend right now. Instead, he scooped her up and buried his face in her cleavage. Darcy laughed, but when he set her on the bed and knelt at her feet, her eyes were wide and her pupils taking over.

Bucky took time to cherish her, every inch, starting with her feet, massaging out a long day’s stress and placing kisses on each of her ten perfect toes. Working up her ankles, he marveled at the delicate lines of the bones and the curve of her calf.

“Bu-ucky,” she half-sobbed, need and desire thick in her voice. He looked up obediently and she rewarded him with a gentle hand stroking through his hair. “I want you,” she whispered.

“I’m yours,” he said, sliding up onto the bed to hold her. “Always yours. What do you want?”

“Well?”

“You’ve got me, care to be specific?” he teased. “You know I like your dirty talk.”

“I want a chance to get to be greedy, to take you both and be the center of attention. I want to be sucking you off when he comes in the door and have him fuck me into you. I want to ride you into the mattress while he plays with my tits. I want to take you up the ass as he fucks my greedy, needy pussy until I literally cannot cum any harder and every motion triggers a climax. I want a lot, Bucky.”

“I think all that can be arranged,” Steve said from the doorway, and Bucky could see from the tenting of his pants that Steve was just as happy to fulfil each and every fantasy Darcy could come up with as he was. “Should I step out so you two can get started?”

“Get your pants off, Rogers,” Darcy ordered. Her voice was rough with need even as she scooted Bucky up the bed so she could nestle between his legs as he shoved down his own underwear.

“Yes Ma’am,” Steve agreed, and Bucky took the chance to watch Steve strip down as Darcy sucked and licked at his own cock. Steve’s nipples stood taut and his erection twitched as he watched Darcy try her level best to suck Bucky’s brains out through his dick. Bucky near about choked watching Steve roll on a condom as Darcy mimicked the stroke. He did nearly buck his hips when Steve pulled her ass up and discovered the convenient slit in the panties, and Steve groaned at the same time Darcy did. They tried to set a calm rhythm between them, but Darcy wasn’t having it and pulled a hard, long suck at his dick while ramming herself back on Steve’s.

“Ain’t she the prettiest, best, most amazing dame in the world, Stevie?” Bucky sighed. “Feels amazing.”

“Mm-hmm,” Steve agreed, pistoning long strokes at the pace that made her hum around Bucky’s cock. “And she’s so good at blow jobs, too, right Buck? I know she likes giving ‘em, she was all ready for me, just from sucking on you.”

Darcy hummed in agreement and her hand did something that made Bucky see white. When he came to, Steve had moved to kneeling on the bed behind Darcy, whose breasts, still covered in the tantalizing straps, bobbed in his face. He reached up to cradle them in his hands and she laughed.

“You are such a breast man” she teased. “One day, I’m going to show you what a titfuck is.”

Bucky jerked his head up to look her in the eye. “If it is what it sounds like, yes please. I’ll do whatever you want, but please let me do that.”
Her eyes fluttered shut and she moaned. “I’m going to hell, but that turned me on. The begging thing you did. Oh… Steve, fuck me harder, you know I can take it!”

Steve groaned and snapped his hips forward in several fast, hard thrusts before Darcy screamed and collapsed on Bucky’s chest. Bucky smoothed her hair out of her face and reached to help Steve over the edge. After a brief break for water, the trio resumed, this time with Darcy fully naked. They didn’t quite get to everything on her list, but that had more to do with underestimating how quickly Bucky would shoot off when Steve played with Darcy’s tits for him than with willingness.

Thoroughly debauched, Bucky lay back on the bed and let Darcy use his left arm as a pillow, since it never fell asleep. He replayed the evening in his head and thought of something.

“Doll?”

“Yeah,” she replied lazily.

“You said the begging thing turned you on?”

“It’s not necessary,” she started to try to reassure him.

“Neither is cake, strictly speaking, but I’m not going to turn it down,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Cake is totally necessary,” she rebutted.

“Cake is a serving method for icing,” Steve muttered, “and Bucky means he likes the begging thing too. Like I like the ordering me around thing. It’s hard to trust most of my orders, I get to trust yours and I like it. He’s not usually in a safe headspace to show weakness or beg, ‘s why he likes getting to.”

“That’s sort of psychoanalytical of you,” Bucky complained, more for the principal of it than anything else. “What’re you doing bringin’ shrink stuff to sex?”

“It’s sex stuff, not shrink stuff,” Steve defended. “I looked it up, it’s part of that stuff like in those London Life magazines, with the pictures of the girls with the riding crops and the latex clothing.”

“Steven Grant Rogers,” Darcy gasped. “You went looking up BDSM sex tips? America would be appalled.”

“I’m not making love to America,” Steve groused. “I’m making love to you two, and I wanted to make sure I didn’t fuck it up. There’s books and stuff on safely handling it, not just the slap and tickle parts, the after stuff, like this.”

“I’m impressed, Rogers,” Bucky teased lightly. “So prepared.”

Steve tossed a pillow at him and Bucky caught it.

“But really, Steve, good call,” Darcy said. “We may need that. Not now, though, now we need cuddles and naps.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Artists of the spa: Sif-speak for spa techs.

Notes:
Impostor syndrome is that lovely (read: horrific) doubt that high-achieving individuals get with an inability to internalize their accomplishments and a persistent fear of being exposed as a "fraud" in their area of achievement. I good way to deal with it is to realize that the higher you go, the more likely everyone is feeling it and if they look like they have it together it's because they're faking the calm, just like you.

Ian is not actually Darcy's intern any more, but they kept the titles as nicknames.

There's a big difference between a woman in a male dominated profession and a trans man. While I'm giving Asgard the benefit of the doubt in how they handle actual trans or genderqueer people, both Sif and Loki are shown facing gender bias due to their skills laying outside the norm for their genders. Hence Sif getting a spa day with gossip mags and mani-pedis.

The Jennifer Lawrence on stage trip would have been recent news in January of 14 when this is set.

Cheng Mei is a survivor of the Chinese version of the Red Room. She and Nat met after they both escaped their respective countries, and Mei set up a spa to house and employ all the other Báishé (the Chinese Black Widows) that she smuggled out.

Lingerie made from lots of little bits can balance looking sexy with using up scrap fabric. The illusion lacing design was pretty popular then as well, since is was affordable and made all the guys go hubba hubba.

Sex that deals with power imbalance or control, like bondage or dom-sub stuff, can really affect your mindset and most people in the lifestyle pick up at least a bit of psychologist talk in our regular discussions of sex. Understanding situational barriers to relaxation, like Steve does about when Bucky feels safe begging, means a greater degree of safety when trying to work with those aspects. Trust and communication are key to a healthy approach to BDSM.

BDSM and kink are nothing new. In the 30's and 40's, a magazine called London Life celebrated the kinkier side of life, which was flourishing despite, and in some cases because of, the War. While rationing meant fewer luxuries, it also meant buying rubber gas masks looked like a smart move for much of England due to the fear of chemical weapons. Topics covered included impact play (spankings and crops were common), rubber clothing, foot binding, and corsets.

EDIT: Here's a bit of extra on BDSM safety and psychology from Maharet. "There are psychologists who specialize in counselling people about BDSM. Some people get messed up by it, and other people want advice about how to get into it safely. Some BDSM groups actually advise their new members to go see one, before getting involved in the lifestyle.

It can be very useful, and can make the experience even better, because you will have a better idea of what to expect, and will know how to ask for what you want. The psychologist can also help you to understand yourself better, so you can put together a list of your soft, and hard, limits.

My friend is one such psychologist, and we have discussed BDSM. I highly recommend that anyone who is seriously interested in exploring BDSM, go to a see a sex therapist, a few times, before getting into it. There are many levels of BDSM, and if you get into the
wrong group (rougher than you want) before you are ready, it can really mess with you, both mentally and emotionally."
Remember guys, Bairn supports anything that's Safe, Sane, and Consensual. If you want to branch into risk-aware areas, be sure you really are aware of the risks, physical AND mental. Stay healthy friends!

Teaser:

"There is a threat in our territory that hunts men, and men only. Put the Kikimora on notice, my ladies hunt tonight.”
February hit with a slightly confusing vengeance, temperatures rising and then dropping, along with sudden showers every other day. Darcy bundled her boys in layers, and herself stuck to the indoors. Their sick preoccupation with running aside, her days were just too busy now.

She’d flown out to London to finalize the embassy arrangements and get a staff hired, including a good-will visit to Lizzie that led to the future King thinking that he should re-think the number of badass women in his life. The trip had been fun, but Steve was needed in Washington as the Squidgate thing proved to be the gift that would not stop giving, so it was just her and Bucky. Fury had called while they were out and Bucky spent a week over on the continent with Skye as she recovered from a gunshot wound. Even after they all went home, he didn't leave his sister's side as they waited to see if the wonder drug they'd been forced to use would have side effects. Skye getting hurt would have been enough for her to decide that the month wasn’t going well, but that’s not where the hits stopped.

She’d been stateside for under twenty four hours when the call to assemble sounded. She rolled into action and hit the meeting running on adrenaline.

“What’s the panic, big guy?” she asked Thor as she snapped shut the wrist closure on her upgraded shock gloves.

“Our actions on Asgard did not go unnoticed or unused by enemies,” he said gravely. “The sorceress Lorelei has escaped her prison cell and means to cause Midgard harm. She is… more dangerous than any woman I have yet met, and yes, Sister, I mean yourself and Sif as well when I say that.”

“Okay,” Darcy said, nodding. She knew she wasn’t always going to be the biggest or toughest threat out there, it’s what made her an Avenger and not a bully. “So, what’s the plan of attack?”

“We use her one weakness as our strength,” said a mellow female voice she didn’t know. She
turned and there was Loki in his female form. “She can’t work her magics on women. Men, most
certainly, she can control most with voice alone and any at all with a touch. I believe it has to do
with how she’s tied her sexuality and her seidr together.”

“Okay, we can work with that,” Darcy agreed as Steve pulled a face. “No arguments, Steve. I
know mind control and you aren’t risking it. Natasha, Pepper, Loki and I can rendezvous with Sif,
and take the fight to this Lorelai without ever risking her taking control of any of the world’s most
powerful men.”

“But Loki is a fella!” Steve protested. “In a female looking body or not, how is he going to be safe?”

“Lorelei’s spells have never worked on me,” Loki countered. “It’s all sexuality powered and mine
is… more complex than can easily be harnessed. Add not looking like one she should wish to
embrace in the ways of lovers, and I’m immune to her dubious charms. Had you a man with no
desires towards women at all, and you might provide someone who was not susceptible to anything
but touch, but unless this is why my sister needs two of you, you’re not that man, Captain.”

“You aren’t, Steve,” Tony added, typing into a tablet as he spoke. “But Rhodey is. I’ve requested
he come to join us. She can’t touch him inside the War Machine rig and he’s not into women that
way. Or men, but the women thing is the cincher.”

“I called Betty,” Bruce said from his own tablet. “She and Maya are willing to meet you there.
Betty’s offering after support and Maya wants to test a new area control weapon.”

“Hawley sends her regrets, and Ciara can come out if this lasts to Friday, but she can’t get an
approved sitter until the weekend.” Natasha added. “I know where a couple of my sisters were a
few years back, I can try getting them to meet us.”

“I’d love to have the devochki there,” Darcy said carefully. “But if there were good reasons not to
contact us before, aren’t there also good reasons to let them stay safe?”

“Galina doesn’t contact you because she’s a nun now,” Natasha said dryly. “She’d love to reconnect
but she’s being stubborn about meeting men, even Papa. Katenka is just socially awkward and lives
on the internet with Uncle Morita. Brina became a supermodel and I’m not sure she even noticed
the Battle of New York. Nika joined the Bratva in Vegas and has been more than a little busy with all
the anthills we’ve kicked over. That’s all that I can list off the top of my head. Katenka isn’t that
useful in the battle itself, but she’s more use than Oktyabrina, and Galina is a pacifist now. I think
Nika would be the best choice to call for this.”

“Call Nika, then,” Darcy told her daughter. “Tony, you get to play Jarvis this time, feel free to send
out the boys whenever you think they’d be useful. Do not listen to the audio yourself, have Jarvis
translate for you. Steve, can you work with Tony on an eye-in-the-sky to help if we need a bigger
picture strategy?”

“I can,” he said, kissing her fingers lightly. “Be safe.”

“As I can,” she promised, flipping his hand to kiss his palm. “Keep that safe for me, will ya? I’m
coming back for it.”

On the quinjet, Darcy sighed. Pepper looked over at her and wrinkled her nose. “It’s different,
when we’re the ones going off to risk our lives alone and they have to stay home. It’s not fun, why
would they do this in the first place?”

“For one thing,” Darcy responded slowly, trying to give it due thought. “Tony at least started like
This. He didn’t know there was better until at least when Stane pulled his nonsense. He loved having you fight beside us so much that the first time you and I fought side by side, he asked you to become an Avenger. And my men have literally never fought alone any time either they or I could help it. There were some times before the swaps set in for each of them, but after? We don’t do “alone” as a general rule.”

“Thor never lacked for battle companions,” Loki sighed, and Darcy thought she caught a glimpse of her brother’s softer side. It was oddly easier to see on him as a woman, which either was him feeling safer to express it, it being closer to the surface, or her being more used to looking for that mix of love and hurt on a female face. “I don’t mind being alone in battle, I just don’t care for being left on my own. That’s a feeling I know too well.”

“Clint hates working alone,” Natasha added. “He always has. I thought it was weird when we met and I realized he’d had a fight capable agent as the handler on the mission. That’s part of why it took me three years to accept Phil’s offer to come in from the cold. I like solo missions more than he does, it’s a personal preference.”

“Someday, I want to hear that entire story in exacting detail,” Pepper threatened. Darcy laughed and pulled up flight schedules for the auxiliary Avengers they were pulling in.

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Veronica Morozova stilled herself into what could have been called a statue of flesh. She’d always been good at the hiding games, able to stay much stiller than excitable Dasha or impatient Lesya. Now, though she didn’t hide. One of the only female heads of any section of Bratva anywhere, she was seen by the ones who mattered, and she liked it like that. Her bodyguard shuffled uncomfortably, and with good reason. She’d been likened to a cat, going still before pouncing to kill. She’d also been likened to a praying mantis, though not by anyone who lived to regret that choice. Stillness could mean dangerous things when it came to Veronica.

It did this time too.

She re-read the message, double checked the cyphers and the code phrases, then snapped her head up. “Dima, call in every man of the family.”

“Yes, Ms. Morozova,” he said dutifully. “Are we preparing for a war?”

“No,” she said coolly. She didn’t mean to scare him, she actually encouraged questions, they meant her orders got followed well. “But there is a threat in our territory that hunts men, and men only. Put the Kikimora on notice, my ladies hunt tonight.”

“Yes Ma’am,” Dima nodded hastily, scurrying from the room. And that was alright, a certain amount of fear for the half trained assassin and her female warriors was a sign of intelligence, not cowardice.

She stood and pulled out her bookcase, revealing her secret closet. Time to change into something a little more deadly. The fawn brown kevlar should do, in case of blood it wasn’t prone to staining, and it was decent against most basic weapons. It wasn’t padded enough to hold up to a high power gun, but she’d taken tumbles off her motorcycle in things like it and avoided road rash, and she pitied the idiot who tried to get through it with a knife. Of course, she was a bit shapeless in it, but she had never held her beauty as high as some of her sisters. Natka needed the beauty she had to survive, and Oktyabrina was as vain as they came, but Nika had always been a slim, straight stick of a girl and grew into a pale, sharp dagger of a woman. She got where she was on fierceness and smarts, not looks, and everyone knew it. The pale brown desert camouflage looked particularly sack-like.
after she strapped on her weapons, but that’s why her girls called themselves the Kikimora, and not something more attractive like the Rusalka.

“Nikki?” asked Mimi, one of her seconds from the door. “I heard you were putting the men in protection, is this something to do with the Dogs of Hell thing? Out by Rosie’s?”

“Possibly, Mimi,” Veronica sighed. “I’m going out to help someone I owe a debt contain the issue and fix the problem. Anyone who wants to come with me may, but it’s just as important to keep the men out of her way. I will not subject our people to brainwashing and mind control. I will not.”

“Understood. I’ll settle the rosters, then. You may want to go settle people down, they handle having a woman Avtoritet, but being told to come in from the threat while we fight… they’re modern, not secure in their manhoods.”

“I can do that. Thank you Mimi. Oh, and make sure that Nadezhda is on the home front. She’s trying to have a baby, we should keep her from having to improvise a sniper nest.”

“Of course, Avtoritet.” Mimi bowed sharply and hurried off. Veronica smiled at the faith of her people. She had expected keeping this position to be as hard as getting it, but some good help had made it much easier. That was a thought of the past, however, and in the present, she was running late to meet Natasha, and her sister’s allies.

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Betty helped Maya with hauling lab equipment into a small building made out of a metal shipping container. Betty waved at the arriving group and pointed off the tarmac at a temporary building of corrugated metal.

“Over here! We’re setting up observation chambers in case we take in her victims, too. Some of the reports around here sound like she’s already got her hooks in guys. What’s our plan for attack?”

“Hi, Betty, Maya,” Darcy greeted with a determined smile that said more about her tension than her mood. “I’m glad you two seem to have support covered, I’d like Sif coordinating us on ground tactics for Asgardian physiology, but Loki will want to weigh in on her magic. Pepper and Nat for melee and we’re getting Rhodey in to give air support. I might be getting others, but we’ll have to see if Nika can get out here in time.”

Betty was about to comment on that when the roar of a particularly powerful motorcycle broke the air. Natasha perked her head up, the edges of her eyes signalling happiness to anyone with enough experience in understanding a Black Widow’s facial expressions. Darcy turned to the newcomer as a drab olive helmet came off a severe looking woman with white blonde hair in a braid.

“NIKA!” Darcy shouted, a grin covering her ear to ear.

“Hello?” the woman said cautiously.

“Dobroye utro, moya sestra,” Natasha called, waving at Darcy. “Eto nasha Mama.”

Betty slid back as the family reunited. She didn’t want to get in their way. Of course, meeting Darcy turned into meeting Loki, which turned to meeting Maya, who pulled Betty and Pepper in, and soon everyone was clustered around Veronica Morozova, attempting to figure out how they were related to the person beside them.

“So, I know if you’re a Red Room girl you have some fight training,” Betty said, careful not to offend the former Widow candidate. Maya was still sort of touchy about having let her skills lapse.
“But do you have a current firearms licence, and more importantly, are you still proficient?”

Darcy turned a little red either in anger or embarrassment, and Natasha scoffed, but Morozova smiled and nodded. “Do you have a target for me to show you?”

Betty pointed to a fence rail not too far off. It wasn’t too different from the Army’s basic range if she moved a bit away from the group. Veronica nodded, pulled a handgun and fired, leaving a neat hole in the exact center of the rail. Everyone blinked, because the draw, aim and fire had all taken maybe four seconds.

“How did you learn to do that?” Betty asked, impressed. Someone whistled low in admiration.

“One I left Russia, I joined the Russian Mafia,” Nika said casually, as if admitting to collecting stamps. “You get very good at shooting very quickly when you’re trying to be a respected member of the Bratva... while being a lot closer to a sestra. Men learned that disrespecting my skill got them shot, and I learned how to shoot without looking like it takes effort.”

“Are you happy with it at least?” Darcy asked. Betty noted the wistful hope and fear that connected all Darcy’s words about the missed time between the freedom and finding of her children.

“Yes, Mama,” Nika said with a certain serene quality. “I keep my people safe, I have a good family, and my sisters in arms are very happy to have a place in our organization aside from spying. I had them secure the roads. We can get to Rosie’s, where the trouble seems to be centered, without any trouble. I also warned the local law, they won’t be going out there. My word is known as good when it comes to warnings. I never want to get some paycheck cop dead because of dealings outside the law.”

“Good girl,” Darcy praised, and Morozova beamed. “Let’s go catch a sorceress.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Kikimora: a malevolent female ghost of particular danger and ugliness.
Rusalka: Russian sirens, also dangerous, but far more beautiful.
Avtoritet: the Bratva equivalent of a Cappo, who runs a large section of the criminal empire of an overboss or Pakhan.
Dobroye utro, moya sestra: Good morning, my sister.
Eto nasha Mama: This is our Mom.
The Bratva: the Russian Mob, close to 'the brotherhood' in meaning.
Sestra: sister

Notes:
Some things change, some stay the same. Skye still gets shot by Ian Quinn, but this time she is given plenty of rest after being saved by the GH 325 and her team is not assigned the Lorelei case.

Loki mostly presents as male unless he's tricking people, but his gender identity is 'troublemaker' so Steve's concern while kind, is misplaced. He's never shown in the
comics as falling for Lorelei's powers (as interested in taking advantage of her hots for him, yes, as actually in love or in obsession with her, no.) I'm choosing to say this links both to his genderfluid nature and the fact that he's pretty much only interested in anything real with Sigyn, regardless of what other genders are available.

Rhodey is an Asexual, Demiromantic man, and with the above headcanon for Lorelei's powers, that makes him mostly immune. Add the suit and he's the only man who can go on this mission.

The Bratva are a very traditional group, and the women of the Bratva have a very specific role that does not extend to leadership. Darcy didn't raise any doormats though, and Nika demanded the respect she eventually got. As the Avtoritet of Las Vegas, she got like-minded women together to form a sort of vigilante group that furthers the Bratva's aims and kicks the butts of rival gangs. Said gangs don't ever try to blame the Bratva because everyone knows the Bratva women don't fight.

The Dogs of Hell are a biker gang in the MCU. They got targeted by Lorelei in her bid to build an army at Rosie's Desert Oasis. Nika has people out there watching the Dogs for signs they'll move on the Bratva, which is how she gets their faster.

Nika has never seen Darcy, at least not in the context of that being one half of Zima. Hence Natasha having to introduce them.

Teaser:

“But Daddy!” she whined, slapping a hand over her mouth as she realized what she’d said.
“I do not know what the new fascination with butts is,” he joked. That was a lie on all counts, it wasn’t new and he totally got it, but it got her groaning.
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

The mission wraps up quickly and the team gets some much needed family time with the kids.

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy smiled at Talia. It was nice to be getting the family back together, despite all the bad that had gone down. Talia called out a teasing challenge to Maya and Nika and then dashed toward the bar. Beside Darcy, Loki laughed.

“It is like one of those formulaic jokes that Anthony likes ,” he said, shaking his head as he walked Darcy to the back of the high tech bus she’d nabbed from Fury to run command. “A blonde, a brunette, and a redhead walk into a bar…”

“Laugh all you want, right now you’re their Tetushka,” Darcy said, grinning. “Bucky practically had to sit on Nat to keep her from bombarding you and Skye with her family love needs when we got the official paperwork. It can be… intimidating.”

Loki paled a little as the implications of her newly official relationship to Bucky sank in and stepped away, leaving Darcy to her work. At least the chairs for the command bus were comfy for collapsing into after the long flight. Darcy pulled up the feeds from cameras her daughters were placing inside the bar as Pepper entered from the rear and Sif stepped in the front door.

“Lorelei, still manipulating men to do your dirty work, I see.”

“And I see you’re still a step or two behind,” the redhead in leather purred.

“You know how this ends, Lorelai,” Sif said, ignoring the jab. “So come willingly.”

“You mistake me for someone who fears you. I’ve bested you before, or have you forgotten?”

“I was careless, then,” Sif said, cutting off any command the sorceress might use. “I knew I could take you down, but I did not protect my friends and was unwilling to harm them when you took their wills. That’s different now.”

“Oh, truly? You think you’ve become warrior enough to attack innocents?” Lorelei laughed and Darcy raised her com.

“Move fast, move quiet,” she told the team “Mark on Sif.”
“I think that this time, I did not come alone,” Sif said grimly. “You’ve made a mistake, Lorelei. On Asgard, the warriors were all men you could turn this way and that like a puppet. But this is Earth, and its defenders are of all sexes. Like Black Widow.”

Natasha dropped from a rafter past a camera, hitting the ground seconds before Maya and Nika.

“Tear them apart!” Lorelei screamed.

Maya ducked down and began setting the area control weapon while Nat took out a biker with her new ICER. Nika dodged a knife blade and began fighting hand to hand. Sif backhanded a shotgun out of someone’s hand, and Pepper blasted her way in with hot but fast burning fire that was more bark than bite. Darcy struggled to track the battle on the grainy feeds of security cameras and the jolting of body cams, but the fight was short.

“Was that all?” Pepper asked, taking a deep breath to calm down, lowering the glow from her fists. “It seemed… easy? Is easy the right word?”

“Well,” Darcy said, stepping over an unconscious biker tangled in a grey-green goop from Maya's weapon, “to be fair, you’re used to super villains and world destroyers. This was basically a bar fight. It’s not like this challenged you.”

“I am a Queen,” Lorelei shrieked. “I make empires fall before me! Men die for me, kings kneel!”

“Not anymore they don’t,” Loki warned, placing a hand on her neck. It glowed emerald green and when he pulled back there was a delicate tattoo nestled in the hollow of her throat. “Now you can safely speak during your sentence. We won’t be putting you back in the silent tomb you knew before. No gags. No-one deserves that.”

“I see we’re championing prison reform,” Natasha remarked, looking over from where she was showing Nika pictures of Zoe and Harley. “I can send you some papers from human rights organizations on ethical imprisonment and the psychology of correctional facilities if you want.”

“Thank you, that’s kind of you to offer. I’d appreciate something to read on the flight home.”

Steve was happy he got to meet Veronica during her short trip to New York to meet the rest of the family. It was rare he got to get such a good look at who Darcy and Bucky had been back then. Natasha had recovered from most of her wounds during her time with Clint and was understandably reluctant to open them again with anything more than incidental mentions of that time. Nika still needed closure on much of it, and he was strangely pleased she included him in that healing process.

He was also happy she stayed long enough to meet the kids when they came home for Spring Break. He hadn’t liked sending them to a boarding school, even though they both admitted needing some isolation to safely figure out their powers. They seemed to be turning the X-Men into a nice surrogate family and they had plenty of friends if the sheer volume of pictures to show Clint and Tony were an indication. Steve wasn’t exactly jealous of the kid’s time, but he was pleased that neither of the kids more favorite people tried to keep that time to themselves. He knew he wasn’t quite cool enough to be the go-to on his own.

Of course, sometimes, the kids surprised him.

“Steve? Can you help me with a homework project?” Zoe asked him. She was standing at an angle, but he could tell that was so she could supplement her hearing aides with lip-reading.
“Sure thing, Green Bean.” Zoe always laughed at his increasingly ridiculous nicknames. “What’s the project?”

“We’re designing lairs,” she told him and Steve blinked. “It’s not like that, Steve. That’s just what we kids call it. Technically, it’s a ‘safe and supportive regeneration environment’ but that’s basically a lair for anyone who wants to go cape and cowl. It’s supposed to be someplace we can rest and practice our ability. I have my ideas, but all my friends are doing drawings. I don’t have to draw, and art is way too hard for me ‘cause I’m crippled…”

“Whoa there,” he cut her off. If that school taught her that, he was having strong words with Xavier. “Where’d you get a silly idea like that?”

“Well, it’s true,” she answered with a surly shrug. “Everybody always said it, and just because the new school is too nice for the teachers to admit it doesn’t mean it’s not.”

“Zoe,” Steve said, fighting to keep the hurt from his voice. “I was crippled too. All the way up to joining the War effort. I was also an artist.”

“But being sick and skinny isn’t like… this,” she said, waving at her eyes and ears.

“I was colorblind and half deaf, it’s not that different,” Steve told her. “Do you want a drawing to take into school?”

“Yeah, that’s why I asked,” she said, exasperated. “If I describe it, will you draw it for me? It’s in the rules, I can ask for a grown-up’s help. Ilyana is getting her brother to help her.”

“I’ll help…” he started, but stopped her from cheering. “But I won’t do it for you. You’ve got to at least try it. We can ask Jarvis to get us better art supplies for you to use, and I’ll show you how to lay in the foundation, but you’re going to draw this yourself.”

“But Daddy!” she whined, slapping a hand over her mouth as she realized what she’d said.

“I do not know what the new fascination with butts is,” he joked. That was a lie on all counts, it wasn’t new and he totally got it, but it got her groaning.

“Captain Rogers,” Jarvis interrupted. “May I suggest you start with Sir’s imaging chamber? It has the best 3D modeling capability and is voice operated. Miss Keener may structure the space as she wishes and I can print out different views of it for her to work from. If it becomes too frustrating for a beginning artist to tackle such a large project by hand, I can also give her access to the digital art programs that Sir uses to design paint jobs for the new suits.”

“That’s a great idea Jarvis, thank you.”

In the imaging chamber, Steve walked Zoe through concepts like shape dominance and flow. It was a different set of problems than a painting, but the same concepts applied. She liked his description of the golden rectangle, especially when he pulled up a line drawing of how it could be used to draw a nautilus shell.

“Oh! This is like Harley was talking about, it’s math that’s also art.”

“Exactly,” Steve said with pride as she got it. He lifted his light pen to sketch out a new set of lines. “So are snowflakes and trees. It’s all fractals and that’s math, but it’s also where that great natural beauty comes in. Trees use the Fibonacci sequence a lot.”

“I want a trellis on that wall that’s shaped like that,” she said, pointing to the Fibonacci tree. “With
posts made out of something shiny, like metal, but with something softer like ceramic doing the lines so that I can have climbing vines on it.”

“You’ve got a pen,” he reminded her, and she marched to the wall and started drawing. The posts she drew were rounded, but thick and had hollows in them.

“I can put a growth medium in there, and then I won’t be stretching one plant too far. This wall needs to be smooth, though. The vines will pull a brick wall down.”

“Where will you sleep?” Steve asked, looking at the assignment sheet that Jarvis had pulled up on a hard light sheet. “This says you need a rest area.”

“I want a hanging bed,” she said, drawing a basket type arrangement with thick-linked chains angling up. “Jarvis, I’m too short, continue those up please.”

“Of course, Miss Keener.”

“And I want to have a cover to pull around the top part so I don’t have to turn lights on and off before getting in bed.” Jarvis added a basic curtain, but Zoe frowned. “That doesn’t look right.”

“What do you want to change?” Steve asked patiently. “Think it through. Can you solve the problem or do you need to come at it from another angle?”

Zoe thought, biting her pen and squinting. “A Clapper. Jarvis, can you make a note I want a master light control that turns off all the lights except the ones between here and the bathroom door, and turns those to dim, set to a sound cue.”

“Yes, Miss Keener. If I may, there are also plants with bio-luminescence if you’d like to explore continuing the organic motif into lighting design.”

“Mostly sea plants, though,” she commented with a sour face. “I don’t do well with the sea plants. They give my power carsickness.”

“I was thinking rather more like the Neonothopanus gardneri, locally known as flor de coco. It’s a fungus, technically, that glows quite brightly.” He pulled a three dimensional image of it up in front of them. The fleshy yellow caps ranged from little half inch buttons to over three inch wide cups. Jarvis switched the picture to one in the dark and the green glow amazed Steve. “If you’d prefer a light reported to be able to serve for reading, Omphalotus japonicus, commonly known as the tsukiyotake is an option.”

The picture shifted and Zoe feathered a finger over the blue-white glow of the plate-like mushrooms.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Fungi are great for getting rid of dead plants, and I’ll need that, but I haven’t tried messing with them and I’ve heard they’re hard to grow without a superpower.”

“Sir also knows a botanist working on a bioluminescent tree,” Jarvis offered. “He’s not having as much luck as he’d like, but with your powers I think you could speed his production up. The team is based in San Francisco, but you could likely do the same at Genspace in Brooklyn. Doctor Jorgensen is quite fond of helping mutant students with genome based projects.”

“You don’t need to make the whole tree,” Steve said before Zoe could get off topic. “The question is, if you could, would you want to?”

“Yeah,” Zoe said, taking her pen and sketching a basic egg shape before flipping the pen to erase the top lines. “Something sort of feathery like a grass, though.” She filled the light vase with straight
lines sweeping up to her shoulder and it resolved into a planter filled with fluffy-tipped prairie grass that glowed a soft blue.

In the end, her printed views were a bit too complex for Steve to feel okay insisting she draw all by herself, so he had Jarvis turn them into coloring pages and showed her how to pick colors and shade in the shapes to force a three dimensional effect.

“Thank you Steve-Dad,” she said quickly as she rolled the finished product and fit in in a poster tube. “Thank you Jarvis!”

“You are most welcome, Miss Keener,” Jarvis said, and Steve just hugged her. The happiness in his heart would make it hard to talk anyway.

Bucky hadn’t actually spent much time near the Avenger’s wards. When they first brought them home, everyone was scrambling because of Tony and the fight with the Mandarin and after that, they’d been focused on getting the kids into school and getting them some kind of therapy for the stuff they’d gone through in Rose Hill. He was happy to stand behind Darcy and Tony and glower at the people trying to act like those kids were better off in their original home that was quite literally nightmare inducing, but he wasn’t going to fuck up their recovery by spilling his issues all over.

Evidently, nobody cleared this plan with Harley, who spent spring break in Bucky’s shadow.

“Kid, you can’t sneak up on me,” Bucky said after two days. “I was trained by the best and most ruthless spy-makers of all time.”

“I’m not trying to sneak up on you,” the kid insisted. “I’m trying to get your arm to talk to me. It’s super irritating to have it sitting there, obviously more intelligent than the toaster, which talks to me non-stop, refusing to say anything. I want to know why it’s being a butt.”

“You and me both, kid,” Bucky sighed.

“Can you make it talk to me?”

“I’m not a technopath”

“Do you know why it won’t talk to me?”

“It has been protected. If your gift doesn’t interface through magical barriers, it might be an insulation issue. Or it’s because it’s a body part.”

“Tony’s Arc Reactor doesn’t sulk like this,” Harley pouted, “and it’s a body part.”

“Tony’s chest magnet is a fully functioning piece of equipment outside his body,” Bucky said carefully. “He doesn’t talk about the time that became important much, but Pepper told me about it when I was setting up our security protocols. The Arc Reactor has to be body compatible, but it shouldn’t ever be a be a part of the body.”

“It wants to be, though. It cares about him, and he needs it because he’s scared of being trapped without power,” Harley said. Bucky rubbed his face with his flesh hand. This kid wasn’t giving up.

“Do you really want to know the difference?” he asked.

“Duh, yeah,” Harley said. “Please? Please please please?”
“My arm is wired directly into my nerves, and the base structure is bolted onto my bones,” Bucky told him bluntly. “It was designed to never come off ever again, not because it works better or I need it that way, but because it was designed to be an arm, and arms don’t usually come off. We could take it off, but it would be a lot more dangerous and difficult than Tony pulling his reactor out. Especially now that he’s gotten the shrapnel bits out of him.”

“Oh.” Harley looked a little green.

“Hey, now,” Bucky said, trying to add some levity. He’d meant to shock the kid with the overshare, not break him. “You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah… I guess I forgot to think before I prodded. Miss Pryde is always on me about that. I’m not good about understanding privacy. It flexes so much, both person to person and topic to topic.”

“It’s like computers,” Bucky said. “I’m okay with certain people having Admin access, others having Program access, and all my friends get User Access. You’re neither my spouse nor my doctor, so User is all you normally get. I just dumped a huge bit of complex code on your head is all. It’ll be okay.”

“I guess.” He perked up a little. “Wanna go ask Tony to let us tinker on a car?”

Ah the durability of children. “Sure thing kid.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Tetushka: Auntie (Russian).
Bio-luminescence: living things that glow.

Notes:
Better warned means better prepared means Lorelei has nobody to take her to Vegas and that fight is over much faster.

Loki and Natasha both have Opinions on the ethics of imprisonment. They both respect that some people are a danger to self and others when not confined, but are interested in ways of doing so that aren’t borderline torture. Loki, with his long and very intense history of being forcibly silenced as a punishment, sees the gag-collar that we see in the show as abhorrently cruel.

There's a lot of debate about boarding schools, and much of it can be seen in the Marvel world. Tony hated his boarding school, he saw it as parental neglect and abandonment. Harley and Zoe actively wanted to go to Xavier's because they need the privacy to learn control with safety guides in place. Ultimately, it's up to each family to find a good fit.

Zoe has an awful lot of bad tape about her congenital birth defect and how it impacts her life. She's in a supportive environment now, but she's still going to say stuff from time to time that horrifies her family. Likewise Steve uses some terminology that is offensive now, because he grew up with that as the accepted term and as it's about himself, does not see the need to change it. He'll shift for things that are not about him (see African-American replacing 'negro') but these are his words and he likes them.
Assistive technology is amazing, Jarvis is just more amazing. I largely speculated on the capability of the imaging room based on what we see in the movies and what's out there now.

Climbing vines have certain needs and they tend to destroy brick. As in the whole house can come down with enough ivy on it. Trellises can slow the damage, but not prevent it. Non-porous surfaces like sheet metal survive it better.

Bio-hackers have promised glowing plants, but it's not easy. With how many mutants are out there doing their thing quietly enough not to get into the main issue in the Bodies-verse, I'm assuming their genetic research is farther along. Genspace is a real bio-hacker lab that the public can go to in Brooklyn, run by Dr. Jorgensen. She has a great TED talk on youtube.

Harley has a hyper-curious mind, and as such tends to ignore 'not a good topic' cues unless they're less clues and more clue-by-fours. He's in the better-vocab version of the 'why?' phase, and Bucky firmly believes in giving answers. He also believes in teaching kids where they went wrong instead of just hurting them for going wrong. The computer access analogy is a good one, but Bucky's delivery is a bit shaky because he mostly knows that stuff from Darcy and what he learned for spy shit.

Teaser:

For all that the Greatest Generation was a lot more like Millennials than Boomers or Gen X, Darcy admitted she was a child of the microwave era.
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Old threats bring new challenges, but above it one thing becomes clear; do not fuck with this family.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Beth_Mac, tigrislilium, Jade01, JER, Dances_With_Vulcans, Notashamed, SionnachOiche3, QueenOfTheQuill, Tsita, nemohana, ValkyriePhoenix, Shadows_of_Shemai, Joey99, hhhellcat, and CupKatyCakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In April, Darcy discovered an entirely new side to the mess of Squidgate. Not every rat went down with the ship, since Hydra had learned from Schmidt and this time they hadn’t put all their eggs in one basket. Half a dozen cells that had no affiliation to anyone or anything SHIELD were still operational, and that was just the ones she knew about. Tony gave her time off to deal with it. She tried to insist she could be an Avenger and still have a job, it wasn’t like Tony himself didn’t, but he was having none of it.

“Short Stack, when was the last time I kept working despite a major and painful part of my history rearing it’s ugly head?”

“The Mandarin thing,” she said instantly. “That’s not the same. You were grieving.”

“It’s totally the same thing,” he countered with a wave. “You lost too much to those tentacled jerks to ever face that problem with a clear head. Nor should you, battle rage is great for coping with super villains. It’s not so great for keeping all us squints from blowing up Manhattan.”

“I don’t need a mental health vacation, Tony,” she said. “I’m not crazy.”

“Oh course you aren’t, Lewis. You’re rightfully pissed as hell, full of seventy megatons of explosive anger and pain looking for a target. I never say this because it’s super gross, but right now, you’re a lot like a gun. There’s nothing in this mess,” he waved at her body, “that isn’t dangerous, and the main question is, ‘can we aim you at something that we want shot?’ because if we can’t, our options are really slim. I want you aimed at the people who deserve it, not my scientists.”

Darcy sighed. “You’re right. I’ll be in the War Room if you need me.”

The War Room was dominated by a holotable, but screens covered the walls as well. Darcy turned on the table and flicked open the file on John Garrett, aka Bionic. He’d been loyal, it seemed, until a Hydra operative had set him up to be left for dead. After surviving the IED, though, his behavior changed. He’d been recruited, probably by the same guy who ordered his call for evacs to be ignored. After that…. he brought in some of the most persistent new squids. Including Grant Ward, the mole that fucked up the Bus team’s internal composure as everyone tried to figure out if he could
be redeemed or not. That was a clusterfuck that kept on trucking.

Especially since he’d just broken into a storage facility called the Fridge with Garrett.

The video she’d gotten from Fury on the raid showed several key weaknesses that she highlighted. It was clear enough that some of the other people double checking the tapes would catch the same thing, but that’s why they had multiple independent reviews. He’d gotten out with a lot of dangerous stuff, gravitonium, a freeze machine that nearly leveled the Academy, a berserker staff that even Thor was happy SHIELD had kept locked up… all of it super deadly and super not in good hands anymore. Especially with the prisoner escape list. That was full of nothing but bad news.

She updated APBs on half a dozen servers with the new stuff that would require stronger than usual containment and sent Tony an email. When he responded, she sent her request and his note to Pepper, who sent back an approved budget and Darcy posted bounties on the Darknet for some of the items, complete with full hazard warnings and a list of past repercussions for fucking about with them to prevent any budding supervillains. Agents Wise and Pollack had been pretty clear after the electrical virus nearly killed Simmons. Had they know what sorts of things lurked on Chitauri artefacts, Benny never would have retro-fitted the gun that got them nicknamed ‘Alien Bonnie and Clyde’ before recruitment. Letting people know it was safer to stay back and call it in got things like the Peruvian 084 bomb actually brought in.

Darcy cracked her neck and stood up, going back to their private floor for food. When she got there, Bucky was ladling out soup and Steve was pulling a pie from the oven.

“Is is possible to die from Americana overdose?” she asked playfully, sneaking a peck on Steve’s cheek.

“It’s Fruit Jumble, not apple,” he told her. “Bucky found a farmer’s market, and they had a bunch of stuff left over that they didn’t want to take back with them. We made the fruit into pie and the veggies into soup, since you’ve been working pretty hard.”

Darcy fought down the unfair twitch of jealousy. Cooking for any reason besides hunger was a Steve and Bucky thing, one that she didn’t fully share. For all that the Greatest Generation was a lot more like Millennials than Boomers or Gen X, Darcy admitted she was a child of the microwave era.

“Best Husbands,” she said instead, taking a bowl of hearty soup and a kiss from Bucky. They’d make it.

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Steve adored his family. After a long morning of hard work, Darcy eagerly accepted the food and fussing that Bucky loved giving and settled in to take a nap on their comfy couch while Bucky sat on the floor with some model gizmo and Steve sat across from them in the oversize recliner designed to hold an adult and at least two kids. His newest sketchbook was filling up with portraits, but he was considering a switch to landscapes or maybe even fantasy, so he reimagined Darcy’s repose on to a soft grassy hill, and Bucky turning to check on her when her sleepy mumbles turned tense as a knight, kneeling to his lady. The arm lent itself to armor design anyway.

“What’cha drawing, Punk?” Bucky asked once Darcy settled.

“You two,” Steve answered, adding a bit of detail to the imagined gown on Darcy’s charcoal counterpart. “Wanna see?”

“Do Catholic bears Pope in the woods?” Bucky returned. Steve stuck his tongue out at his husband
and flipped the book to show off the picture. Bucky frowned. “You realize she’ll slap you for making her Snow White, right?”

“She’s not Snow White,” Steve said with a frown. “Snow White was fourteen, at most. She’s some other princess. And not a cursed one, just one that felt like taking a nap. Naps are good. Sleeps that last more than a day are bad.”

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed. “I really felt for Snow, after. I mean, she tried to escape, and the danger followed her. And it didn’t look like danger she was used to, so she got poisoned. I mean, at least Sleeping Beauty didn’t have any idea she was running from her curse. She got sixteen free years.”

“But she sleeps for a hundred years. When she wakes up, all she’s got is a couple of kids with a deadbeat dad and everyone she knew and loved is gone. She skipped all of that time. A lot of stuff changes in a century,” Steve said, idly adding a tree behind his drawing of sleeping Princess Darcy.

“Yeah,” Bucky said, moving to lean his head on Steve’s knee. “We’d know, wouldn’t we pal?”

“Let’s not go there,” Steve muttered. He ran a hand through Bucky’s hair, admiring the silky flow. “I’m glad you kept it long.”

“Yeah, I like it better like this,” Bucky said. “The old cut took so much work, and it’s not like I need to make a show of picking up dames every week now. It’s nice to just please a few people and not have to figure out what keeps the most dangerous ones offa ya.”

“So what are you building?” Steve asked, pointing with his pencil to the half built box of parts.

“3D printer,” Bucky said. “I got the instructions and the file for free online, and Tony is letting me use his to print the parts, and I’m putting it together on my own. Then, I’m going to print the parts for a second one and give them and the instructions to someone who wants to build one. So that they can print a printer, and if we all do it right, the whole city can print stuff.”

“Like what?” Steve asked, setting aside his drawing to watch Bucky explain how the printers work and what you could make. He’d pulled up a file for little versions of famous statues when Steve got a great idea. “Can anybody put a file like that up?”

“Yeah, that’s kind of the point,” Bucky said. “I know that look. What’s up Steve?”

“You remember those clay figurines you made for Darcy back in the War? Of us?”

“Yeah, it’s only the biggest thing the art therapist ever talked about with us. She still has ‘em, well, her Ma does. Jane told me.”

“Wanna help me make a print file of the Commandos? The real ones, not you as a teen and whitewashed as all get out like what they sold back then. We could do action figures or little army men types, but they’d be real.”

“Heck yeah!” Bucky cheered, then blushed when Darcy mumbled sleepily at them.

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Bucky finished digitally sculpting the mulish curve of Morita’s jaw and set the tablet aside. Steve had gone down to the gym with Sam, Darcy was back in the War Room setting more digital hounds on Garrett than Cruella DeVille had ever thought of, and Bucky was sort of at a loss.

“Jarvis?” he asked the empty space, knowing that the AI could hear him.
“Yes, Sergeant Barnes?”

“Is there anything I could be doing that you think would help? You’ve got an eye in the sky on basically all of our people. Anyone need a sniper?”

“Agent Coulson’s team are in Portland, but their quarry does not seem to respond to traditional weapons. All the Avengers are in standard non-combat roles, the Embassy is functioning normally, and the children are doing well at Xavier’s. I’m sorry Sergeant Barnes, but—” Jarvis cut off, which was unheard of. Bucky surged to his feet.

“Jarvis? Jarvis, talk to me!”

“Miss Barnes has just hacked into my systems,” Jarvis said. “She’s sending an alert. I’m updating the quinjet with coordinates. Haste is recommended.”

“On my way,” Bucky said, running through the halls. He passed Tony and Bruce and waved at them as they asked what the problem was. He distantly processed Jarvis telling them what was up as he skidded into the elevator. If it weren’t for Jarvis, he’d never take elevators, too risky. But Jarvis had an iron grasp of elevator security and would make them go faster in emergencies. He’d compared that to human heart rates once, but it went over Bucky’s head.

In the jet bay, he saw Steve and Sam already prepping the plane, so all Bucky had to do was grab the back-up rig from the locker and run up the gangplank.

“Jarvis told us,” Sam said as he checked the dials. “We’ve got your back.”

“Thank you,” Bucky said with a sigh. He could put on his uniform once they hit cruising speed and the quinjet had a small armory behind a side panel. Now was for taking a deep breath and regaining focus.

In Los Angeles, Bucky stormed the hangar where they’d taken his sister, her GPS tracking pendant guiding him in with Jarvis talking in his ear. Seventy years of terror, his and others, became a single-minded pursuit that made rational people run away without him even having to draw a weapon.

Steve and Sam went to control the civilians and keep air traffic control from clearing the Bus.

In the plane, Bucky stalked. Jarvis had called in Maria to try to talk Ward down, but it wasn’t happening if the relay from Jarvis was any indication. The maze-like layout wasn’t helping his mood as Ward told Hill that if Fury needed eye candy, he should have picked Natasha.

“That’s real funny,” Maria said with a grin in her voice as Bucky stepped closer to the cockpit. “I’ll tell her you said that. Or better yet, you can explain that to her father.”

“I don’t let men who talk that way about my daughter touch my sister,” he snarled at Ward, the asshole who insisted he loved Skye. “Call me old fashioned, I think you respect all women or you just don’t deserve any of them.”

In a conversation about the mole, Skye had asked him once not to kill the traitor, but that was the only reason he stopped at a punch. Ward groaned and spat blood. “She’ll see one day, it was the only choice I had.”

“No,” Bucky said, raising his ICER pistol. “There are always more choices. I worked directly for Alexander Pierce. I was the Fist of Hydra. And I never once followed an order the way they wanted. I lied, I hid the targets, I took sloppy shots that got my handlers caught, I fouled the works as much as I could, all while having my brain fried with lightning and my blood pumped full of chemicals to force my hand. There are always other choices. You just made the wrong ones.”
He fired and turned, stalking back. He found Skye and snapped the cuffs that bound her before scooping her up. “Hush, hush, moya sestra, it’s okay, I’m here now.”

“He took the drive,” she sobbed.

“Ward never left the plane, he’s passed out and you’re safe,” Bucky said.

“Not Ward. Ward was a patsy. Garrett has the drive. He stopped Ward’s heart and made me start the hack. Then he restarted Ward’s heart and told him to get to 35,000 feet. But he took the drive and got off the plane. As soon as he hits the right altitude, he gets everything.”

“That’s not important anymore,” Bucky said, cradling her head in his shoulder. “What’s important is you are alive and Ward is in custody. You’re safe. Everything else can be fixed.”

“Bucky?” Steve called. “We’ve got a very worried SHIELD team out here. You wanna share Skye yet, or are you still reminding yourself that she’s okay?”

“Go to your friends, sestra,” Bucky said softly. “Remember why we fight. It’ll get better.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Squints: scientists
Moya sestra: my sister

Notes:
Using a weapon metaphor for people is a super creepy and dehumanizing thing to do in 99% of cases. You can see unethical use of the weapon metaphor in basically any X-Men comic that discusses Mutant Registration, or in any of the Civil War crisis arc. However, in this case, Tony is right. Darcy is far too volatile to do anything but track and punch bad guys here.

Benny Pollack and Claire Wise were characters in the Marvel One-Shot "Item 47" where Benny got a Chitauri gun to work and they used it to rob banks. Sitwell tracked them down and recruited Benny to R and D, and got Claire a job as Blake's assistant. In Agents of SHIELD, a Chitauri helmet infects people with an electrostatic virus that kills them. Simmons barely survived and I'd imagine as R and D for Chitauri stuff, Benny would hear and suddenly freak out over how close he came with the gun.

"Do Catholic bears Pope in the woods?" is a purposeful mash-up of two phrases that mean "Yes, obviously." The first is "Is the Pope Catholic?" and the second is "Do bears shit in the woods?"

Steve isn't talking about the Disney Sleeping Beauty, he's talking about the old version where she's raped and wakes from the pain of childbirth.

There are lots of models of 3D printers, Reprap actually encourages you to print a printer and pass it on.

I'm fixing the difference between the make-up of the 1940's comic Howling Commandos and the movie versions by explaining most of the others as either part-time
but "more acceptable" Howlies, or as whitewashed versions of real Howlies. Also, comic Bucky was a kid sidekick. That's not the case AT ALL here, so of course Steve and Bucky want to fix it.

The kidnapping and save from Agents of SHIELD goes differently in this because of time separation and the fact that Mike Peterson never became a Hydra asset due to HERO keeping Ace safe.

Teaser:

“How do you know all this?”
“It’s a family business,” Harley said with a shrug. “Do you think Uncle Tony is going to want to make kids? Someone’s got to learn to do that when he retires to Aruba.”
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Summer brings new challenges in parenting.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To SionnachOiche3, ValkyriePhoenix, Notashamed, Laurel_Wolford, Jade01, Beth_Mac, Shadows_of_Shemai, and hhellcat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy started to feel restless as the kids came home for the summer. Everything was being handled by the field teams, there weren’t any threats big enough to need the Avengers, and the biggest fight she’d seen in a month was when Hill and Sam moved in on the same day and there was a passive aggressive snark off over use of the freight elevator. Of course, the kids kept things from being too boring, especially as she worked with Jarvis on summer activities.

“I’m not going to summer camp,” Harley said petulantly. “I’m a technopath, it would be like solitary confinement. Which is wrong.”

“Oh, no summer camps,” Darcy agreed, flipping through information on the holographic display Jarvis was managing. “There’s a children’s museum that does engineering classes.”

“Why do I have to take classes at all?” Harley whined. “It’s summer. Summer is for being lazy and not learning. That’s why school lets out.”

“Actually,” she countered offhandedly, “schools let out in the summer because that’s when farms need all the extra hands they can get and we used to be an agrarian society that utilized child labor. Besides, I’m well aware what happens when you let kids with genius IQs get bored. I’m not letting you and Zoe destroy the city because you didn’t have enough to do with your time.”

“Ugh!” Harley grunted and threw up his hands.

“I want to take the class on tree-house building,” Zoe said, pointing at the brochure Darcy picked up. “I like tree houses and I got a really good grade on my lair design.”

“Oh, that’s upstate a bit, do you want us to rent a cabin and drive you out every day, or do you want one of us to be a volunteer chaperone so you can stay in the on-site housing?”

“Can I have Clint-Dad and Mama Nat?” she asked.

“Up to them, go and make puppy face at them,” Darcy told her and Zoe scampered off. Darcy turned to Harley. “Okay, kid. What’s it gonna be? Because if you don’t pick one of these, I’m just going to call my parents and you can have your entire summer spent being alternately coddled and taught history.”
“CPR and first aid,” he said with a sigh. “Because someone has to be the team doctor.”

“We did hire someone for that,” Darcy said gently. “And no offence, but Helen is a grown-up. With a medical degree.”

“I know that,” Harley said with an eye roll. “I meant the future team. You’re all going to want to retire at some point. Then who will save the world? Us kids, because we’ll be grown-ups by then. So we’ve got to keep an eye on what the team looks like now, so we can plan for then.”

“Young essay on ‘what I want to be when I grow up’ is a stack of battle plans, isn’t it?”

“Duh?”

“Yeah, you’re our kid all right. I’ll put you in all the junior medic classes, and you might want to consider joining a scouting organization if you can get Xavier to start a troop. That preparedness works well with them and it’s a good way to learn a little bit about a lot.”

“Boy Scouts?” he said wrinkling his nose. “You know I’m a mutant, right? The history there, not real impressive.”

“I was thinking Activity Scouts or 4H, actually,” Darcy said, sliding the right pages at him. “They both have a firm mutant acceptance stance. And if that fails, I will buy you the handbooks for all of them and you can mash them up however you like. The badge system works even if the politics don’t.”

“Fine,” he sighed, rolling his eyes. “I’ll think about it. And I want the Red Cross stuff where we can get it. Deal?”

Her heart tugged a bit that he still treated stuff like a negotiation.

“Red Cross was what I was thinking. In the meantime, Tony said something about a spud gun upgrade? Mind going to find out what that’s about?” Harley smiled and turned to dash out of the room. Darcy called out as he hit the door and he stopped. “Please remind him you’re not allowed combustion fuel weapons until you’re sixteen.”

Harley just stuck his tongue out at her.

Steve volunteered to take Harley to his classes, since nobody was really comfortable with him walking on his own to the 49th street station yet. Besides, it was a good chance to catch up on what the medics had changed in the past seventy or so years. He knew it was a lot, even just to when he and Darcy started swapping, but trying to catch up with books only got him so far.

“We own cars, you know,” Harley said, slumping down on the subway platform. “Lots of them. Tony has a motor pool, pretty much.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, wondering where this was going. “Why do you mention it?”

“Why are we in the subway?” Harley asked like Steve was being particularly dense.

“Kid, have you seen the traffic in this city? We’d have to leave four hours early. Besides, the New York transit system is a perfectly fine way to get where you’re going and once we’re satisfied that you’re not going to die in an alley somewhere, I’d say you can start going places without one of us a lot faster than waiting for a driver’s license. That kind of independence is rare outside places with
“Darcy’s not going to let me go anywhere on my own until I’m drawing social security,” he drawled. “She’s way too protective. I mean, she sees one example of my bio-mom being a jerk and she totally overreacts.”

Steve snorted. Harley looked at him with one brow up, learned either from Natasha or Tony, Steve couldn’t tell. “As soon as you can beat the training sims the Harrow boys like best, Darcy’s going to give you a map and a compass and send you to run errands the city. She’s not overprotective, she’s realistic. You’re ours, so you’re a target, but if you can fight back well enough to fit in with the rest of the family, then she’ll respect your capability. Emotionally, yes, she wants to protect you from ever getting hurt ever again. Physically? She’ll trust you with as much as you prove you can handle.”

“Huh.” Harley pulled out his phone as they took seats. “Without hacking this, I think I can beat this simulation in… maybe two months? By next school year, for certain.”

“So you’ll get to go to high school fully able to navigate your new hometown. Fun huh?”

“Yeah. But I also want to learn to drive a car.”

“When you’re sixteen, kiddo,” Steve said. Two tired looking moms with an infant in a front facing pack got on and scanned for seats. “Let’s stand, those ladies look like they could use a sit-down. You wanna offer our seats to them?”

“Sure. Hey, Ma’am, you wanna sit?”

“Yes, thank you,” said the one with their bags. “Kendra, you take the window, you know Sara likes the view when she’s fussy like this. Such a polite young man.”

“I’m learning from a good teacher,” Harley said and glanced at Steve. “What does your baby like?”

“Shiny things,” the mother with the squirming infant said, pushing a braid back behind her ear to show a matte plastic stud earring. “We learned that the hard way.”

“Cool, I can do shiny,” Harley said and held up his phone. A set of dancing stars hovered over it like a tiny holotable. Sara snatched at them and they danced around her fingers but didn’t fall or break. She giggled and Steve smiled at the look that passed between the two women.

“What is that app?” Kendra asked.

“It’s custom, my uncle wanted testers for a new phone he’s designing. So my brother and I made this. It burns through memory like crazy, but it’s a good test for the capacity of the new phones.”

“I didn’t know Tony was doing a new phone,” Steve said with a slight frown. “Didn’t he just come out with one?”

“Like last year, Steve,” Harley said with an eye roll. “If he doesn’t release one by Black Friday the board of directors will yell at Pepper and he’ll have to figure out how to fire them without making any of the shareholders mad. Nobody yells at Aunt Pepper.”

“Not if they’re smart,” Steve allowed. “How do you know all this?”

“It’s a family business,” Harley said with a shrug. “Do you really think Uncle Tony is going to want to make kids? Someone’s got to learn to do the job before he retires to Aruba.”
“Just don’t feel like you have to,” Steve said carefully. “And tell Darcy or Pepper if he pressures you.”

Bucky hummed as he set up the charcoal grill on the big balcony off the penthouse level. Tony had suggested a Memorial Day cook-out for the family, and Bucky had offered to handle the grill since Tony and cooking were… touch and go still and while everyone loved Clint’s baking nobody trusted him with meat. Bruce usually stepped in when Clint couldn’t cover food, but he was currently full up on Tetrodotoxine B with every intention of not rejoining the living until after the last fireworks ended. He was scared of the sounds and Hulk tended to try to grab at the sparks, which never ended well for anyone.

“Hey bro, Betty sent me out here with veggie kebabs,” Skye said as she gave him a side hug. “I’ll be here for the holiday, but I’m going to tap out during the afternoon to work something for Coulson a bit before coming back out for fireworks. It’s a good thing you like ‘em. Matt hated all holiday celebrations that involved blowing things up.”

“What’s Coulson got you doing on Memorial Day?” Bucky asked, shocked. “He knows better than to do that! Memorial Day is special for those in the service.”

“It’s a long running project,” Skye hedged. “I’m just working on it this weekend because now I have access to the Stark Tech that’s not on the market yet. You remember GH 325?”

“Yeah, saved your life,” Bucky said.

“There are side effects.” She waved rapidly as Bucky started to get concerned. “Not for me! I haven’t had any. Not everyone does. But the ones who do… it’s not pretty. Garrett carved up his cell something awful, but all the carvings are the same, sort of. It’s connected, and the source of the drug is extraterrestrial, and AC and May are super worried about it all, and I have a good eye for patterns. Hence weekend work. I’m willing to put in the overtime because we don’t know if I’m immune to that or if it’s delayed, or what.”

“That’s fair,” he said, pressing a kiss to her hair. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Will do!” she chirped and ran off back inside, where Darcy and Thor were discussing the differences between Earth and Asgard in their holiday traditions for fallen soldiers.

“Hey buddy,” Sam said as Bucky got the first burgers out. “Want a hand?”

“It’s a grill, Wilson, not a bomb. It’s not that tricky. Light fire. Cook meat. Receive praise from hungry masses. Repeat as needed.”

“Actually, I was trying to give you an easy out to go play with the kids,” Sam said with a grin. “Ciara just showed up with her three, and your younger ones are torn between wanting the responsibility of babysitting and terror. I’d say terror is a rational response, but if the Keeners are anything like my cousins, you’ll need to be stealthy when spotting them emotionally.”

“Oh,” Bucky said. After a moment to consider, he handed Sam the marinade brush and went over to where Skye was trying to beg off another game of beeper darts so she could go work on the GH 325 project. “Heya, MiniMonsters, wanna teach me how to play your new game?”

The twins started explaining excitedly and Skye shot him a grateful look as she left. It turned out Ciara’s little girl was a better aim with the velcro-covered beeping balls than Bucky was. The mechanics inside that made the beeps weren’t even, so he fumbled a bit before consistently getting a
ball to stick in the mid-range ring. Then the basketball hoop came out and the argument about height came up. It had the feel of an old one. Little was too short to play effectively in a game that rewarded tall players, but basketball was still fun. Bucky tapped her shoulder as she turned away in a pout.

“I’m a pretty sturdy horse if you want to play that way,” he said. She smiled in his general direction and climbed up his metal arm expertly, taking her seat on his shoulders. The awkwardness of figuring out movement commands evened out the advantage of his height, and everyone was happy with it.

Steve stopped their game to remind Bucky he needed food, and the twins gleefully grabbed plates and hot dogs from their mother, who was looking amused. Bucky passed Little a pickle spear to eat while he assembled her burger at her direction, and then passed it up as well. The paper plate balanced on his head gave her a good surface to eat from and keeping a hand on it to prevent spills kept her upright enough he could use both hands to eat his own dinner.

“The Fam-Chat is going to love this,” Darcy said, chuckling at her phone. “I am so glad Skye and Katenka worked that out so we can safely keep home movies.”

“Get Ciara’s permission before you put video of her kid up on our chat site,” Bucky reminded. “It’s the most secure thing on the internet but it’s also full of former child assassins and quasi-dead soldiers.”

“Dude,” Darcy laughed. “Who do you think alerted me to all the adorable? Ciara’s the one who told me to share it.”

“Darn right I did, your kids are the best chance my kids have of being kept safe during a zombie apocalypse,” Ciara nodded, holding out a fist for Darcy to bump. “Mom-boom.”

“Mom-boom,” Darcy agreed, bumping their fists and spreading her fingers in sync with Ciara.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Tetrodotoxine B: Movie-goers might recognize this as the fake-dead drug Fury used. Before that it was in use by Bruce to keep Hulk down. It works better now that he's working with Hulk in their headspace and both are consenting to a nap.

Notes:
I've known people, even very smart ones, who felt like Harley does, that summer break is for goofing off. I'm not of that opinion, I think it's for learning skills that can't be taught in a standard school. Darcy is right about the origins of the summer break, though. (Also, bored smart people=dangerous to self and others.)

There are camps to learn arboreal architecture, aka super cool tree houses. Go google it, they're awesome.

Unlike much fan-canon, Bruce remained team doctor just long enough to interview and hire Dr. Helen Cho. He knows some biology, but he's not that kind of doctor anymore than he is a shrink.
Scouting organizations have a long and not entirely spotless history. Boy Scouts of America's record is particularly gnarly about discrimination against people for gender and sexuality. In Marvel, that adds in genetic status and Harley is thoroughly peeved Darcy would suggest that. However, some scout-type groups have decent track records and policies. 4H exists in our world and Activity Scouts was invented by ysabetwordsmith for her Terramagne universe setting.

New York City is insane to try to navigate by car. Subways are the way to go there, hence Steve's reaction. They seem cheap and not high class at first, hence Harley's reaction (he's been living in a mansion and the Tower, he's not being a snob, just confused why rich people do this too.) However, once you learn them, subways are very convenient and usually safe. A great tool for kids who can't drive yet but want some transportation freedom.

It's polite to offer your seat on public transit to older people, people with disabilities, pregnant women, and parents with small children or babies. Not everyone knows that, so Steve is modeling for Harley. It's also telling to the moms that they offer a seat for a f/f couple, which is why there's more willingness to engage with Harley's Southern-bred chatting than New Yorkers tend to do.

Babies grab earrings. This has been a PSA.

Not everyone reacts well to fireworks, and kids with impulse control can get hurt. This isn't Bruce sitting on Hulk, it's both of them deciding that it's safer to sleep through the holiday where things go boom.

Memorial Day has a special meaning to members of the Armed Forces. No superior officer would demand work on any non-vital project on that day. Skye deciding to multitask her holiday is okay though, not everyone celebrates the same.

Beep Ball and beeper darts are versions of ball games (and vecro-darts) that can be played by the blind. Little is blind, so the Harrows play with those balls. Skye's other brother, Matt Murdock, is also blind, so she's not thrown by the concept and is pretty good at compensation for the beeper's weight/balance.

The Fam-Chat was built by the Howlies+RedRoomGirls+Legacies hackers to be a quintuple encoded super secure chat room and social media site for the family only. Mostly because nobody has lost enough reasonable paranoia to want a reunion more than once a decade.

Teaser:

She’d found a certain degree of comfort in not being the only freak. That vanished when she found herself robbing a Kree bank.
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

Darcy goes to deal with family trouble, from the other side of her family.

The world of swaps is getting weird and the scope is getting... Galactic.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Notashamed, Shadows_of_Shemai, Tsita, Beth_Mac, Joey99, quadrad, SionnachOiche3, Maedae84, ValkyriePhoenix, ClockWeasel, hhhellcat, Snowdove30, wenched, Jade01, QueenOfTheQuill, Layla Haris, Selene_Aduial, Matilda_Nicki, GreenEyedPixie87, and nemohana.

I had to go on hiatus to find paying work because starving artist is not my jam, but I've gotten over the financial hump and can post again, but I can't promise any kind of schedule. Some weeks will be better than others. Sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Summers were always a little odd for Darcy since leaving Missouri. Not bad, just... how do you know it’s summer if the humidity is low enough you don’t need gills? Dry heat was the weirdest. She missed jungle-like air and her favorite local frozen custard place.

Of course, Jane spent most of her life going from one site to another and had no internal measure for seasonal climate, only seasonal star charts. And Steve and Bucky grew up in the city they lived in now. And Tony sort of avoided the midwest in favor of places that didn’t roll up the sidewalks at nine in the evening, so coastal breezes were his norm. Thor was no help, Bruce had bad memories of jungles and wanted no part of her current yen for humidity and Clint, her fellow midwesterner, had run off upstate with Natasha and Zoe for the tree-house building thing.

Which left Darcy pacing beneath a climate control vent while Jarvis piped cool mist and hot air through the system in an effort to settle her homesickness.

“Really, Doll, we can just take you home for the summer,” Bucky said patiently. “I’m always happy to visit Paul and Liz. I like your family.”

“I can do this,” she insisted. “I’m not proving Cousin Hilda right about my ability to live in the big city.”

“You can do it, but it’s driving you up a wall right now,” Bucky pointed out. “And if you lose it, the team folds, because we’d all be trying to get you back up and functional. It’s for the greater good.”

“Fuck it,” Darcy sighed. “Pack our bags, I’ll get us a flight path and okay taking the jet.”

“Miss Lewis,” Jarvis interrupted. “Would Oklahoma suffice? You have a call on your emergency
line from one of your cousins. She seems desperate.”

“Put it through J,” Darcy commanded.

“Darcy?” her Aunt Margaret asked in a panic. Technically, Margaret was a cousin of her mother, but in that particular branch, it was all “aunts” for the middle generation. “Sweetie, did I call the right number?”

“Yeah, Auntie Mags,” Darcy said, waving at Bucky to pack. “What’s the problem?”

“Sandra Diane started her swaps, well, we think. They aren’t… normal. But after you, we need to re-think what normal, or heck, possible, means. Because if this were any family but ours… it’s not good honey.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can. I’m bringing my Swaps with me and I may call in others, but I trust all of them. That’s clear with your end?”

“Honey, you bring Tony Goddamn Stark if it saves my baby, pardon my French.”

“On my way, Auntie Mags. Love you.” She waited for the click to tell her that the call had ended and burst into action, dragging out her notebooks and her binder of information on the swaps and packing an emergency kit.

“So do you know what all is going on?” Steve asked as Bucky ran through the pre-flight check.

“Nope,” Darcy said, opening a new file on her StarkBook to input the basics of Sandi’s situation that she knew. “Sandi’s young, maybe fifteen? Swaps start at the same age on both sides, and I can’t see how you’d change that. Everything we did to break the rules was a result of that first connection. Sometimes the Line doesn’t even do a swap that gets remembered, if it’s short and isolated it can get dismissed as a daydream or even just not noticed. So whoever is on the other end is also fifteen. It’s non-standard, but I don’t know how, Auntie Mags was too shaken to give me more.”

“What’s Sandi like?” Steve asked. “Figure out who needs her, and go from there.”

“Could be almost anyone, Sandi is a hardcore genius. She likes codes, locks, hacking, math. She sucks with people, but she’s damn good with numbers.”

“Then rest, we’ll be there soon, grab what time you have to stock up on resources.”

Steve corralled the bags as Bucky set up a parameter scan of the home they’d bustled into. Darcy was off getting fed cookies and slipping anti-bug counter measures into various places around her aunt’s house. Their room was large, thankfully, on the second floor and complete with an ensuite bathroom, although not anywhere as swank as the Tower. It was nice, even if there was just a bit more pink than he liked. It was a fine color, it was just… pink on the carpets and the sheets and the wallpaper above the chair rail? Was too much pink. Thank God it was broken up with white beadboard and white lacquer furniture.

He laid out their things in the way he knew his loves preferred, then went to spell Darcy with Margaret so she could put in more bug zappers and spell Bucky on the parameter watch.

“Hi, Ma’am, I don’t suppose I could trouble you for a glass of water?” he asked.

“Oh, of course, not at all a trouble, Steven, come on in, sit, sit,” Margaret insisted, waving him to a
kitchen chair. He dropped a kiss on Darcy’s hair and whispered an update in her ear. She kissed his cheek and breezed out while her aunt was confirming that Steve did not want ice in is drink.

“I think I’ve had about enough of ice for one lifetime, Ma’am.”

“Oh, drat it,” she said, covering her mouth. “I’m sorry Steven. I should have thought. You just seem so... at home here, now, I mean.”

“I know what you meant,” Steve said, taking the water glass with a smile. “And I am at home. Home isn’t where and when you live, it’s who and how you love. I’m at home as long as I’ve got Darcy and Bucky. They haven’t got tired of me yet, so odds on me never leaving home again are pretty high.”

“Oh my,” Margaret said with a grin and one hand fanning her face. “Darcy is one lucky, lucky girl. I hope my Sandra Diane finds a man like you.”

Steve made a sound of agreement that remained non-committal. He didn’t want to push the edges of where her family set their limits by adding ‘or woman’ when he didn’t have to, but he was all too aware how it was tiny things like that building up that lead to nights in Brooklyn holding Bucky together as he sobbed into Steve’s lap. Fortunately, he was interrupted in his thoughts by Bucky walking a teen who had to be Sandi in.

“Hi, I’m Steve,” he said, offering the girl his hand to shake as he stood. She took it shyly and gave it one firm shake. “You look like you want to talk.”

“I don’t want to be crazy,” she blurted.

“I don’t think you are,” Steve said slowly, “but if you were, you know there’s some darn good treatments now. Nothin’ like back in my day. You look like a strong girl, whatever happens you’ll be fine.”

“I robbed a bank,” she said bluntly. “In the first swap. There was a super fancy code program and I just had to play with it, but I cracked the code and then the door opened and this blue guy was telling me I was a good safe cracker and they were hauling everything out in bags and we got on this big spaceship and I think the blue guy was my dad.”

“You kept your swap alive,” Steve said slowly, trying to keep his breaths even for her to copy. “That’s what you’re supposed to do. You keep yourself alive, and you keep your swap alive, because the universe needs your swap, and you need you. Everything else is negotiable.”

“Precisely,” Darcy said from the doorway. “Come on Tater-Tot, I brought you a hat made by mad scientists. It’s pink, your favorite.”

“Tater...tot?” Steve asked Margaret.

“Sandra’s always been good at math, we used to call her Miss Calculator, but she couldn’t say it as a kid, and Darcy turned ‘Calcutator’ into Tater-Tot. She likes it, prodigies don’t often get proper socialization. A nickname helps.”

“Darcy does that,” Steve said vaguely as he watched Darcy fit the sensor-lined sunhat to Sandi’s head. She was good with kids, hers or other people’s. Someday, it might be nice to see a kid with Bucky’s smirk and Darcy’s fire get that care.

<^>
Sandra Diane Lee was by no means a stupid girl. She was brilliant, actually, with an IQ high enough to know that the further from average you got in any direction, the harder everything became. The world was made for average people, not for her. Of course, the world also wasn’t really made for people like her Grandma, or her Aunts, or her Cousins. The special ones, the ones who saved the world by saving one person. So she’d found a certain degree of comfort in not being the only freak.

That vanished when she found herself robbing a Kree bank.

After that it was a lot of worry. She worried she’d gone crazy, her Mama worried that her swaps were broken, and her teachers at school worried she was being abused at home which could not be farther from the truth. Her mom thought maybe her swap was being abused though. That was also worrying.

It was all slightly less worrying now that her Cousin Darcy, arguably both the coolest and the freakiest person on the planet, was here to help her.

“Okay, so how many have you done so far?” Darcy asked now that the StarkPad in Sandra’s hands was displaying seven different wave-forms. She let Sandra hold it since she said she wasn’t going to track the data herself anyway.

“Four. I robbed a bank, repaired an anti-matter engine, turned and walked slowly away from a guy with way too many tattoos, and navigated a ravine with rocket boots. My swap has bad aim, he was gonna hit head first.”

“Wow,” Cousin Darcy said with pride. “This guy’s almost as bad as Steve. Did you ever catch a look at him?”

“Brown hair. Jaw is kinda square. He’s short. And kinda skinny. I’d think he was younger than me except that’s not how swaps work. Swaps are also not supposed to take you forward, and there were aliens, and starships, and that’s not a present possibility for humans.”

“You’d be surprised,” Cousin Darcy said dryly. She shook her head. “Never mind, I’ll get Tony to call you on Skype and you two can sort the alien thing out on your own. Any distinguishing marks? Anything at all.”

“He’s got a birthmark on his hip that’s a really even star shape. And he carries a walkman obsessively. Orange, has a mixtape in it from the seventies. Really well maintained, considering he always has it on him. I can’t tell age because of that.”

“That seems like enough for a hit on any Amber Alerts for him, if he was on Earth at any time prior to the space thief thing I’m sure it got reported as a missing kid when he went to… wherever he is. Human right?”

“Obviously,” Sandra said, rolling her eyes. “I would probably have mentioned if my swap was the blue one. You’re cool, Cousin Darcy, but you’re sounding a lot like a grown up.”

“Motherhood ages you, whippersnapper,” her cousin teased. “I brought you cookies from your cousin Natasha’s man. Trust me, you’ll like them. Clint’s an amazing baker.”

Chapter End Notes
Translations:
Roll up the sidewalks: close down public venues like stores, restaurants, libraries, etc.
Pardon my French: I'm sorry for cussing.
Whippersnapper: term for a young person, usually used by people over 65.

Notes:
Darcy is experiencing a form of Seasonal Affective Disorder. Normally, SAD makes people sad and tired in winter because of a drop in sunlight, but it can also hit people who have a strongly established idea of how certain seasons feel who are in places where it doesn't fit. People from a strong-season area like the American Midwest going to weak-season areas like the coasts or deserts, or going from a cold-hot season area (most of America) to a wet-dry season area (India, the Pacific Islands) or vice-versa can experience what is best described as 'seasonal dysphoria' when stuff doesn't line up. Symptoms included that Darcy shows are crankiness, mood swings, and exaggeration of existing psychological conditions.

As an establishing of how the naming works, Margaret calls her daughter Sandra Diane, not unusual for southern naming patterns. Darcy calls/thinks of her as Sandi, which is the name she preferred as a kid when Darcy was the Coolest Babysitter Ever (TM). Sandra herself tends to think of herself as Sandra, a slightly more grown-up version of the name Sandi. Steve and Bucky default to how Darcy does it unless Sandra corrects them, and anyone else will go by who introduces them and how that person refers to her, again unless corrected.

Steve is using Emotional First Aid in his talk with Sandra. He specifically uses active listening and emotional validation, but he brings things back to Sandra valuing herself, which is a crucial skill set, and often easy to forget in a crisis.

Prodigies (exceptionally smart children) often have a hard time forming connections with age-peers because of the IQ gap, and with IQ-peers because of the age gap. A lot of Tony's less admirable traits read like a bad case of trying to grow up too fast to fit in with his IQ-peers. Sandra's family is trying to avoid that by giving her the support and love she needs.

To be clear, everyone here is doing basically the right thing, except Yondu, who should be slapped up the head with a parenting guidebook. Sandra is just in a particularly unpleasant place to navigate and nobody really knows what's up yet.

Teaser:

“I think she won it for me in Hoopka,” Peter said. “It’s not mine and if she’s saving my life then this Sandi person is basically a Ravager. We don’t steal from our own, that’s hers. I don’t know if I’ll remember that though, so can you set it aside for her?”
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

The family starts to deal with Sandra's swaps, and Peter and Yondu try to deal with them too.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Tsita, Beth_Mac, Joey99, Alalaya2, QueenOfTheQuill, Matlida_Nicki, queixo, critterlady, quadrad, Melissa, SionnachOiche3, Shadows_of_Shemai, Lucy, Jade01, Notashamed, ValkyriePhoenix, JER, tigrisilium, Selene_Aduial, and Dances_With_Vulcans.

Darcy let Tony and FitzSimmons know about the updated information on Sandi and dished out the first of Clint’s snickerdoodles to her men, Aunt Mags, Uncle Jake, and Sandi. She knew better than to blow all the bribes on the first day, though, some were hidden in the false bottom of the first box and she had a back-up in her luggage. She got one ping of an email asking for more data before the first batch was out on people’s plates. Simmons was crazy, but that paid off for Darcy so she didn’t comment on it, and instead linked Simmons to the file she was building on the situation. As she was getting ready to offer to take everyone’s cookie plates and coffee cups in, Sandi shuddered a bit and when she opened her eyes was someone else entirely. Darcy had never seen the swaps from this side of things before and it was eerie and a little frightening. She fought down that fear and forced a relaxed smile.

“Hi, you must be Sandi’s Swap,” she said, sticking a hand out in a cheerful greeting she hoped didn’t seem too awkward. “I’m Darcy, what’s your name?”

“Pete, Pete Quill,” he said, shaking it. “This is a really weird dream.”

“Not actually a dream, kiddo,” Darcy said with a wry grin. Now that she was talking to him, he didn’t seem that bad. It was strange, seeing Sandi’s face move in ways she wouldn’t, but it wasn’t scary. It was just sort of sad, because he seemed so confused and lost and lonely. “Sandi is a very special person. Our family saves lives, important lives. Usually because the people living them are about to end them prematurely through idiocy or inattention.”

“I’d like to argue,” Steve said, “but I can’t. I’m Steve, nice to meet you Pete. I can coach you on being a Swap. It’s a lot of responsibility, since it happens because you’re important somehow. Swaps have started wars, ended wars, cured diseases, written great works of literature, all sorts of things.”

“Yeah, what’d you do?” Pete asked sort of sullenly. Darcy handed him a cookie, which greatly improved his attitude. Clint’s snickerdoodles were a powerful force for cooperation.

“Flew a Nazi super-plane loaded with bombs at the Arctic Circle,” Steve said bluntly. “I’m Captain
America. Of course, the swapping is supposed to end when you’ve done your important thing, and we can still do it, so… I guess I’m not done?"

“Like you ever followed the rules,” Bucky snorted. “Look, Pete, for now, just trust that Sandi is doing what you need her to, to keep you alive. Live it one day at a time, one swap at a time. Not everyone is going to go the superhero route.”

“One thing real fast, before you switch back,” Darcy asked. “What year is it?”

“Galactic Standard or Terran?” he asked around a bit of cookie. At least he didn’t lose crumbs, and he took the glass of milk she handed him with some grace. A lot of thirst mainly, but some grace.

“Terran. Failing that, what Terran year were you born?”

“I was born in 1980,” he said. “Years are hard to track out here, that’s why Galactic Standard exists.”

“Okay, so she’s only going back to 1995,” Darcy muttered, taking notes.

“You didn’t happen to get picked up when you were eight or so, did you?” Steve asked. Darcy looked at him but Pete said yes, so she raised an eyebrow as well. “Tony picked up the signal, he told me about it. Almost won an award for it, but there was too much static.”

“So, where are you from, anyway?” Darcy asked, trying to get them back on track.

“Missouri,” Pete said.

“Dude, no way! Me too,” Darcy said smiling, and Sandi’s body started to shake. Pete closed his eyes and Sandi opened them.

“So I just cheated at Space Poker,” she reported. “I think he was going to get caught or he couldn’t pay up and that’s what happened. But I count cards, because how else do you learn a game? Also, I think he was drinking. My body felt weird. I wanna lay down now.”

“Okay, Tater-tot,” Darcy agreed, ruffling Sandi’s hair as she pulled off the scan hat to download the data. “Get some rest, we’ll be here when you wake up.”

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Peter shuddered at the strange sliding feeling in his brain. It was slow and sort of oozing, but he wasn’t sure how much of that was the swap and how much was the Zehobereian Whiskey Salty and Sour he drank at the bar to bolster his courage in a room full of older, stronger, and quite possibly more violent prone people. “Remind me not to drink at that bar again, something is off with their booze,” he muttered to his bunk-mate.

“I figured there was something wrong when you actually played well at Hoopka,” Lyto told him. “Here, drink this, and next time we get shore leave, avoid anything the Captain won’t drink.”

The regenerative drink tasted like hot sauce and lemons, but it got Peter on his feet again. He wandered up the main corridor to the helm to speak to Yondu. The phase-outs were getting worse, this time he actually hallucinated a full conversation. Yondu was pretty clear after the ravine incident left a scrape the width of a belt down his shoulder that any of these things got reported, or else.

“Captain?” he asked carefully. “Can I get a word in private? About those things we talked about before? The phase-outs?”
“Course, boy, I done told you to come to me, didn’t I? Kraglin, you can run helm for a bit.”

Kraglin took the helm eagerly, he loved every chance he had to steer the Eclector. Kraglin wasn’t great with people but he did love the homeship with a fierceness that made Peter a teeny bit jealous. Yondu steered Peter into a side room and sat him down.

“So, what was it this time, boy?”

“I was in that bar with Lyto, starting to play a little Hoopka because I found this article on how to always win, it seemed like a solid strategy…”

“Kid, tell me you did not try to cheat in a Vegaran casino,” Yondu begged, rubbing his forehead where the fin emerged. “That’s a nasty way to commit suicide.”

“It’s not cheating!” Peter defended. “Technically. Anyway, I was one hand in, about to start using the betting pattern to force the game my way when the phase-out hit. I was sitting in a chair, a comfy one, on Earth, surrounded by other humans. One was a pretty woman with dark hair, one was a guy with this super snazzy metal arm, like it was really quality looking. Responded well to him too, especially for Terran tech. And the third new one was… and I know this sounds insane, but it was Captain America himself! Just like from the comic books you got me an’ Lyto to help him with his Terran.”

“Space madness don’t take men like this,” Yondu muttered. “Ain’t a Terran thing, is it?”

“The pretty woman said it wasn’t me. Or not me alone. I was switching bodies with someone to keep me alive. For some reason. The switching thing is on the Terran end, the why thing is probably on mine. But can we trust it?”

“Seems we got no choice,” Yondu said with a shrug. “It’s trust this Terran nonsense to keep your fool head attached or just eat you now and be done with it. And you can still get into smaller spaces than any of us. Tell me if it gets dicey on that end too, we’ll put you in iso if we need to.”

“I will, Captain,” Peter agreed quickly. “Oh, and I want you to take this and keep it safe.”

“Boy, how on seven worlds you get this much credit?” Yondu said blankly.

“I think she won it for me in Hoopka,” Peter said. “It’s not mine and if she’s saving my life then this Sandi person is basically a Ravager. We don’t steal from our own, that’s hers. I don’t know if I’ll remember that though, so can you set it aside for her?”

“Of course, kid,” Yondu said, smiling as close to kindly as he got. “I guess I got two Terran brats for the work of one.”

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Bucky was on watch when Sandi came into the kitchen after her nap turned into a five hour sleep. She got a glass of water and drank it before refilling it and sitting beside him at the kitchen table with a notepad and a pencil.

“Hey kiddo, what’cha got there?” he asked, looking up from his knitting.

“Calculus,” she said flatly. “Math makes my head quiet. But it’s not working as well as it should.”

Bucky nodded, he knew how that felt. Math made his head quieter too. He grabbed a pen and a bit of scratch paper out of his pockets and scribbled out a target trajectory equation. “Try this one.”
“Thanks,” Sandi mumbled, but he could see her getting brighter as she struggled with three-dimensional vectors and air-friction coefficients. After a moment of chewing on her pencil’s rubbery chess-piece shaped topper, she scribbled down a few new lines, hmm’d, and wrote an answer. He leaned over. “That was fun, do you have others?”

Okay, maybe struggled was the wrong word.

Bucky snagged her note-pad and put the equations he’d used for four of his harder shots out onto one page. He slid it back to her and Sandi took it without a word. Fifteen minutes later, she slid the pad to him, and he set his knitting down for a second. He checked it without thinking and flipped the page to fill the back with four more equations, including one where rain came into play. He let her work through those, checked her work, corrected her on how humidity and rainfall affected flight path differently, then gave her four more. She picked it up fast, and only occasionally had questions. Mostly it was the quiet scratch of pencil lead on paper, the quiet clicking of Bucky’s wooden needles and the soft shushing sound of yarn moving along yarn. They worked that way for a couple of hours, until Sandi yawned and he walked her back to her room.

“Thanks Cousin Bucky,” she mumbled. “You’re fun.”

“Get some sleep, kidlet,” he chided. “You’ll need it. But anytime you need or even just want to do Trig and Traj with me, I’m game. I like math too, it’s… simple, when nothing else is.”

“Kay,” she yawned again. “See you in the morning.”

Bucky kept the watch until Steve came into the kitchen shortly before dawn and sent him back to bed. Stevie was more than capable of handling anything that came up before their hosts woke up and polite enough to help with breakfast without scaring anyone with his knife skills the way Bucky sometimes did. Besides, Darcy slept better with one of them to cuddle on and she didn’t like waking until an hour after the sun at least. Bucky gathered the heather and fuchsia yarn that was becoming a pom-pom hat into his knitting bag and kissed his husband’s cheek once before heading towards their bed and Darcy.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Terran: Relating to Earth
Zehobereian Whiskey Salty and Sour: a fictional alcoholic beverage named for Gamora's species, who are MUCH better at metabolizing alcohol than humans. It's pretty potent.
Hoopka: a fictional card game that has elements of poker, based off a stock-market type thing. Strategic bets manipulate the "market" and are frowned on, counting cards to make good choices is not.
Iso: isolation.
Credit: currency

Notes:
Remember back at the beginning of this fic when Steve took Tony on a Firefly Run and they talked about his near-miss with proof of alien life? That was Yondu picking up Peter. Now the threads start to close.

I took a lot of liberties with the non-Earth culture and stuff. For those trying to track
what's canon and what's not, Zehobereians are canon (they're Gamora's people and now basically extinct thanks to Thanos) but the drink is not (the species resistance to alcohol is, however). Hoopka is my own invention, as is the character Lyto, but Kraglin is a canon character. Vegara is a planet I'm basing off Las Vegas.

Peter and Yondu are dealing with the swaps from a completely different angle, and as such speak of them differently.

The canon Captain America comics don't feature Bucky except as a kid sidekick, which is part of how Peter doesn't recognize Bucky. He does however recognize the arm as better than Terran standard, especially as he left Earth in 1988.

The Ravager's Code is sort of sketchy on the details, so I'm basing quite a lot on pirate ships of the Golden Age of Piracy, many of which had constitutions and by-laws and elected officers. One common rule was that while you could loot and pillage anyone else, crewmates were off limits. We also sort of see that in the first Guardians movie with how they react to Peter taking a score that was supposed to be split. Peter is a teen with an above average understanding of his own impulse control, so he's doing his best to avoid accidentally breaking a rule that if an adult broke it, would be a death-penalty offence. Yondu wouldn't hold Peter to that same standard, but Peter doesn't know that.

Bucky and Sandra are interacting as introverts sometimes will, which can look asocial or cold to extroverts, but it's preferred for them. Bucky is actually a lot more mobile in his introvert-extrovert patterns, being one or the other based on situation. On watch or when he's focusing, he tends to be more introverted. Sandra is just naturally better with less interaction, she finds dealing with people stressful.

See the chewy pencil topper and the pom pom hat. EDIT: If you don't want to sign up for a free ravelry account, you can see a slightly less accurate picture here. (The one labeled French Navy/Fuchsia. Just sub out a softer grey for the navy and assume a less mechanical stitch neatness.)

Teaser:

“Why do I feel like all of them could kill me?”
“They probably could,” Darcy shrugged. “Aunt Megan freaked out her boss once because she knew the different shades of purple from two vectors of nightshade poisoning, her sister’s swap was Genghis Khan, Aunt Camilla led a siege once, and we don’t talk about what Casey did.”
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

Happy Birthday Steve! Also, Darcy's family be crazy.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To SionnachOtche3, ValkyriePhoenix, quadrad, Tsita, Snowdove30, TheLurkingOne, FantasyTLOU, QueenOfTheQuill, Joey99, Maedae84, Faiteach Saoirse (jaxx), Dances_With_Vulcans, Beth_Mac, Shadows_of_Shemai, hhhellcat, and Notashamed.

This is being released earlier than I had thought it would because of the holiday (happy birthday Steve!) but I'm not making any promises about speed after this one.

Sandra began her day with toast, eggs, and smoked salmon Cousin Darcy shared with her. Cousin Steve had gone out to get it apparently, he was eating it on a bagel with little green things that looked like peas and smelled like pickles. Then she wrote down everything she saw, said, and did during all her swaps. Her perfect recall was helpful sometimes, but it was also annoying because she really wanted to forget a few of the things she’d seen. Cousin Steve caught her after she finished throwing up and took her out to the back yard.

“Darcy said you’ve got a photographic memory,” he said.

“Technically, perfect recall and eidetic memory are two different things,” Sandra hedged and Cousin Steve chuckled.

“Never try to scam a scammer, kiddo. I’ve got that nonsense too, I know what I’m looking at. Wanna play Blink?”

“What’s Blink?” she asked, a bit confused at the non sequitur.

“It’s a game. I had Bucky print out some of his photography, I’ve never seen any of it, so it’s fair. You flash a picture at me, then ask me a question. We’ll take turns.”

It sounded fun, so Sandra let him cut the stack of photos and hand her half. She looked at the top one and held it facing Steve for a count of three, then put it face down. “How many birds?” she asked. Steve closed his eyes and bit his tongue between his lips like a sleeping cat, then opened his eyes and smiled.

“Four pigeons and three gulls on the rail and whatever that thing coming in for a landing is. It looked like a mutant owl.”

“Good job,” Sandra said, smiling as he flashed a picture at her. He went faster than she had.
“Who was angry?” he asked. Sandra blinked at him and pondered the image she had in her head. She wasn’t great with people. Nobody had looked like they were yelling, or hitting, but….

“The woman in the grey coat, she’s scowling.”

“Good job,” Steve said with a smile. “Emotions can be hard in Blink.”

“Emotions can be hard all the time,” Sandra sighed. “It makes people… tricky.”

“I can teach you some pointers if you’d like,” he offered. She smiled and nodded. He spread out the pictures and showed her markers for small things, tight skin near eyes for fear or worry, the amount of pressure between lips for displeasure, the high, bright spots of red for embarrassment and the lower, softer glow of happiness or love. The loose open stances of relaxation and the tight closed ones of disagreement and the angling in of interest or shared secrets. He broke it down to shape and color, quantifiable variables and the building blocks of faces and bodies. It was cleaner and neater than emotions usually were. Easier to hold in her head.

“How did you learn all this?” she asked, slightly awed.

“Art school,” he replied. “Portraiture is only so much of a picture of someone in full neutral, after that you need to know how to replicate emoting.”

“Are there books for that?” Sandra asked vaguely, her mind off on the idea of mapping cues to fix her constant feeling of not-quite-getting-it around her classmates and teachers. She auto-piloted through Cousin Steve giving her some titles, thanking him, and running into the home office to find more research material.

Steve shook his head as Sandi scampered off to find a computer, muttering about algorithms and sensor points. It was a lot like Jane, Tony, or even when Bruce and Betty got on a bit of a roll. Darcy came in and offered him a hand to stand with.

“She decide to steam-roll you?” Darcy asked.

“She’s a scientist,” he said simply. “It’s in her nature to say things that it’s in my nature to get steam-rolled by. Is she on the spectrum, or just brilliant, because honestly I can’t really tell sometimes.”

“We don’t think she is, she’s just… on,” Darcy said quietly. “All the time. Like how I get when I’m coordinating a mass offence or Bucky and Clint lining up shots. That level of intensity, that’s her baseline. She’s too young for us to get a reliable IQ test back on her, but I’d put money she’s well above 170. At that point, autism and genius stop really separating out. Our best guess is just genius because she doesn’t hyper-focus on her thing. Like Jane has stars, and Kaydee out at the Embassy has celebrity trivia. Sandi doesn’t do that.”

“It’s alright if I still use the Jane-herding tricks, right?” Steve asked, just to make sure.

“Oh, definitely, where do you think I learned half of what I use? Now, I did come in here for a reason, I want to take you and Bucky out to my favorite local mini-golf place and have a real date with you two. It’s been too long and we need one.” She tilted her head flirtatiously. “So, what d’ya say, soldier? Wanna show your best girl a good time?”

“Of course I do, Angel, let’s go get our Jerk and some sunscreen, the reports said it was a bad day for sunburns.”
They also ended up going to the hot-dog shop off the same pedestrian oriented shopping center-slash-park that the golf course was in, and picking up some postcards from a local artist that Steve enjoyed chatting with while Bucky and Darcy were clearly trying to secretly pick out a birthday present for him. After that, they went back to her Aunt and Uncle’s place to pick everyone else up for a dinner at a local pizza parlor.

The trip was a fun and relaxing chance to play tourist, overall, with breaks of tension as Darcy stopped to help with Sandi’s swaps. Steve did notice the dilation was happening a lot faster than it had with him, two weeks popping from a teen to a young man, although he couldn’t say much for the change in Peter’s maturity, which might explain it. He was half tempted to sit the young man down with a serious talk about personal responsibility and safety after Sandi reported saving Peter’s life from a pair of slighted former dates.

Maya stopped by at one point, as did Tony with Harley, although they were headed to California for a convention about tiny robots and didn’t stay long. Sandi seemed quietly pleased by their departure. She wasn’t quite the boisterous type and Tony and Harley took a lot of energy, admittedly. Steve got to meet a few other cousins as July neared and plans for the fourth got made, although he was pushing even his recall at about the thirtieth bouncy young lady with eyes that hid steel.

“So, that’s Casey? Or is that Megan?”

“No, Casey is over there in the introvert’s corner with the art stuff. You’ll like her, she’s fun. That’s Kelsey, she’s getting her MD right now and will make you help her with flash cards. Megan is her sister and she’s an ME, mother of the teen bugging Aunt Camilla over by the lemonade.”

“Why do I feel like all of them could kill me?”

“They probably could,” Darcy shrugged. “Aunt Megan freaked out her boss once because she knew the different shades of purple from two vectors of nightshade poisoning, her sister’s swap was Genghis Kahn, Aunt Camilla led a siege once, and we don’t talk about what Casey did. I still don’t know who her swap was, and I’ve been studying the histories since you and I started breaking the rules. Grandma Bahrenburg became the family library for all the accounts, and I inherited.”

“Wow,” Steve said, a little slack-jawed.

“Close your mouth, Punk,” Bucky said as he was towed past by a grandmother to help with the fire pit. “You’ll catch flies.”

Bucky took a sort of vicious glee in all the trappings of modern Fourth of July celebrations. He helped hang excessive numbers of streamers, he distributed patriotic top hats and frisbees painted like Steve’s shield and got his hands slapped five times trying to steal bites of red, white, and blue desserts. Maya had bugged out as soon as was reasonable after giving Steve a set of experimental art pastels that had the creamy texture of oils and the soft finish of chalks, neither too dusty nor too greasy. Natasha on the other hand, clearly caught a red-eye just to get from the final day of Zoe’s camp to her father. She shared his interest in being excessively American for the day.

“Ah, Papa, this is indeed the life, da?” she asked in a faked accent. “The American Dream, two poor Russians make it to the top and celebrate our freedom with too much food, just enough vodka, and explosions!”

“I wasn’t actually ever Russian, Talia,” Bucky reminded her.
“Oh, I know that, let me play act a bit. Besides, Aunt Megan brought all of Cousin Lacey’s old things she’s not keeping after college and I rewatched both Fievel movies with the kuzeny. I like the sister, she reminds me of Sima, with the singing, you know. And I like the friend from the first one, Tony. I think he’s sort of how I picture you when you were young.”

“As a mouse?” he teased.

“Shush, Papa, you know what I mean. Brash, proud, charming. Maybe more than a bit grey at the temple from chasing after a certain idealistic and trouble prone friend?”

“Does that make Darcy Bridget?” Bucky asked, recalling his first watch of the classic cartoon

“Lord, no!” Natasha laughed. “Darcy is Tiger. Steve brought her back to you two and it was a really good thing she was on your side.”

“Ona zhestokaya,” Bucky agreed.

“Who’s fierce?” Sandi asked from behind him. He wasn’t exactly startled by her presence, just by her question.

“I didn’t know you spoke Russian,” he commented.

“I didn’t,” she said calmly, “but you’re family so it seemed rude not to try. I’m better with spoken than written so far. Who’s fierce?”

“Your cousin Darcy,” he said, blinking. “Has Natasha taught you codes yet?”

“No,” Natasha said slowly, “but I will rectify that. Come on Kartoshka, I’m going to start you on the one my sister used to guide me home once. It’s a pretty story, about a boy who ate bad pizza and fell down a lot and a girl who needed love more than she thought….”

“So, did you know Sandi is teaching herself Russian?” he asked Darcy as she presented him with a completed jello parfait from the tray she chased him off earlier.

“No, but it somehow doesn’t surprise me. Why is Natasha calling her a potato?”

“You call her Tater-tot,” he pointed out. “Also, we did give her the family code name Map Maker. Kartoshka and kartograf aren’t too different.”

“Fair point. My Aunt Jillian is doing fireworks, you’ll either want the super-valium Betty sent with Maya or you’ll want to hit the soundproof room in the basement. She’s where I learned most of my bomb-making. It’s a little crazy when we let her do the sets.”

“Seriously?” Bucky asked, trying to picture Darcy’s definition of ‘a little crazy’ and failing.

“She swapped with Alfred Nobel, the guy who decided gunpowder didn’t have enough boom so he invented dynamite and a shit load of other explody things. And founded the Nobel Peace Prize after an obit mix up. We don’t know which was the thing, a lot of her work was realizing he was handling nitroglycerin wrong and writing stern safety notes, so after he got the hint she wasn’t needed. Knowing this makes huge sections of my childhood make a lot more sense now, honestly.”

“I love you so much, and I’m not just saying that because your family terrifies me. But I do also want to watch the fireworks. That sounds like she knows how to do it without burning anything down.”
“You should be scared, this family scares anyone with the good sense of a groundhog.” She kissed his hair. “I love you too. Don’t stay up with the boom-bugs too late.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Bugged out: left quickly.
Caught a red-eye: gotten on a very late/early flight.
Kuzeny: cousins.
Ona zhestokaya: She is a fierce one.
Kartoshka: little potato.
Kartograf: Map-maker or cartographer
Super-Valium: a stress relief drug like Valium, but capable of working on super soldiers.
Boom-bugs: people who like fireworks.

Notes:
Steve is eating a bagel with lox and capers. Sandra has never eaten lox as a New Yorker would, so she sees smoked salmon and little round picked things.

Bucky’s photos in Blink include these birds from a trip to London, and a skating rink from a trip to Eastern Europe.

Art and science both tend to break big, messy things into smaller, neater chunks. Emotions are big and messy, but a good artist, like Steve, can convey them with tiny changes to a face because he knows how to break it down into little shapes.

Facial recognition software still has a way to go before computers (excepting computer people like Jarvis) can identify any but the clearest emotions, but Sandra is starting with what's already established science in face-sensing and interpreting.

IQ testing is unreliable under 18, it tends to give excessive results in both directions that average out when they shouldn't. That said, any kid with a suspected IQ of over 170 is probably going to show some but not all of the autism spectrum symptoms, simply because that's where it's sort of six of one, half a dozen of the other.

I based the date off of Bricktown in Oklahoma City, it has fun mini-golf, a canal, and a ton of cool shops. I don't want to specifically say that they're in OKC, but that's the inspiration.

Swaps are based on maturity, hence the time connection getting funky. Steve and Darcy did that too, when Steve had to grow up real fast, but Peter is taking it the opposite way, staying an adolescent in his mentality even when he's in his twenties.

The Fievel movies (An American Tail, and Fievel Goes West are the main ones) are films by Don Bluth about a Jewish-Ukrainian mouse family that immigrates to America in the late 1800's. The main character, Fievel Mousekewitz, is a fairly innocent and wide-eyed sort of person, representing the idealism of the immigrant. Tony Toponi, his best friend and helper through much of the film is a lot harder and more jaded, having already seen that America isn't the golden, cat-free land promised. He's romancing Bridget, an upper-class mouse. Tiger is a cat who doesn't want to eat mice.
Russian can be a tricky language to learn, but Sandra is good with patterns and that helps with learning languages and with code-making and code-breaking.

Natasha is starting to tell the story of Ships in the Night.

Alfred Nobel had the craziest life, go read about him, it's worth it.

Teaser:

“Gamma rays?” the woman asked. “Who in the galaxy would work with gamma rays? They’re incredibly dangerous!”
“Well, we know that now.”
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

New problems, new solutions, new swaps

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! For Snowecat, Shadows_of_Shemai, SionnachOiche3, hhellcat, quadrad, Beth_Mac, ValkyriePhoenix, Maedae84, ClockWeasel, tigrislilium, Joey99, Notashamed, Selene_Aduial, and nemohana.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy entered the living room with the weight of half a world on her shoulders. Well, maybe not quite half a world. One third, maybe, which was do-able, she had done that before. It was never fun, carrying the burdens the rest of the world couldn’t and shouldn’t see, but she did know how. Thank god the Line bred strong women.

“So, good news or bad news first?” she asked her family. Most had gone home after the big cook-out, but her men, Natasha, and Aunt Jillian had all stayed to help with whatever nonsense was hitting Sandi since it seemed pretty clear that the issues were getting worse, not better, on the other side. A rapid speed up never meant anything good.

“Bad first, clean the taste out with good,” Sandi said, looking up from where Natasha was carefully painting their toenails a nice petal pink sort of color.

“Fair enough. So, Simmons has gotten back the first round of scans, and your brain isn’t handling the ERB well. The distance isn’t sustainable for too long, that’s why you keep getting headaches afterward. You’re probably doing this swap less because of your actual skill sets and more because in anyone with a less-developed neo-cortex, the impulse levels would make you a vegetable. Being a genius is saving your life, but it’s also putting you in massive danger.”

“Oh God,” Aunt Mags moaned.

“Hey, I did say there was good news too, didn’t I?” Darcy said sharply before her aunt’s reasonable concern could devolve into a sludge of depressed self-pity. “Your Cousin Loki and Dr. Grey are coming in. Jean teaches at Zoe and Harley’s school, and she’s a telepath. The current operating theory is that with Loki’s help, Dr. Grey can link up more minds to the swap and let us bounce in and out as needed so nobody gets an aneurism and dies.”

“Who all will be doing that?” Uncle Jake asked.

“It’s got to be people who have a proven ability to handle the swaps,” Darcy explained. “So the guys and I are definitely on the short list, Aunt Jillian is too, and if Aunt Mags wants to try it, we’ll take that as an acceptable level of risk. I assume everyone I named is okay with that?”
“Nobody in this family runs from danger, just from stupid risks,” Aunt Jillian drawled. “Margaret should stay plain-side, though. We’ll need people organizing keeping us all alive and watching for signs to tap us out. I know I’m not great at knowing when I’ve taken enough damage and need to rest. Also, we don’t know for sure if she swapped at all.”

“So Jake, Natasha, and I will watch the bodies, while Darcy, Steve, Bucky, and Jillian share head-space with Sandra Diane. The new people will fit where they fit, I suppose,” Aunt Mags said firmly.

“Sounds like a plan,” Darcy said, poking at her tablet. “I’m going to go do some of my Stark Industries work in the back office, don’t interrupt me unless the emergency in question is bleeding, burning or blowing up. I both love and hate working from those mobile platforms Tony uses.”

She vanished into her work, the familiar nature of the work and the still slightly-unfamiliar controls of her little robot helper balancing to use all her brain as she eased into it. The work was a great stress reliever, and she was almost sad to pilot back into the charging bay when the alert telling her Loki and Jean had landed popped up on her screen.

She drove out to pick them up from the small private airstrip where Dr. Grey had arranged to land the smaller of the two jets the school owned. A school with it’s own planes seemed crazy, until Darcy looked at available mutant-centric education and realized a good half their student body was from other countries, some of which would have required an exit strategy. Having their own fleet of vehicles reassured the kids and the parents that an attack was escapable, even if the school itself was practically a fortress.

“Dr. Grey, good to see you!” she greeted, catching their attention. “Loki, you look amazing for someone who just flew across the Atlantic. Sometimes I really hate you.”

“It’s a glamour, sister, so don’t hate me too much,” Loki said dryly. “I am the face of Asgard here, I must retain an Image.”

“Your brother’s head is fascinating,” Dr. Grey said. “I really enjoyed the flight, which is rare, I usually hate trips with anyone not trained in basic telepathic etiquette.”

“That’s the thinking quietly thing, right?” Darcy asked. “I went over the theory with the family, but I don’t know how well it took. I guess we’ll find out though.”

Back at the house, they ran over introductions (“call me Jean”) and relations (“I’m keeping you, Cousin Loki, you’re funny”) and slightly more detail on what was going to happen (“stop apologizing for having the power to save my daughter and just do it”) and then ate dinner. After dinner, Jean and Sandi had a session together, just to feel out being inside each other’s heads, and Loki took his base readings for stabilizing the whole thing.

“You know,” he remarked late that night, when he and Darcy were standing the watch together, “I think Thor would be useful here.”

“Why’s that?” she asked.

“He’s not a mage,” Loki said calmly, like he was trying out words for the idea. “He’s the opposite of one. Magic is… less than effective on him, it slides over and past him and disperses harmlessly. It’s why I mastered tricking him with outer tricks instead of taking the much easier and much darker route of subsuming his will. I believe that with Lady Grey’s skills, we could use him as a… grounding rod, as it were.”

“And if we get Jane to come out with him, she can play with the math behind it all, too,” Darcy
pointed out. “Plus I think Sandi would like her.”

“I think you are correct,” Loki said with a smile. “Lady Sandra is gifted of wit but lacking in appropriate conversational partners, and Lady Jane can always use more friends of her own leanings.”

“I’ll call them tomorrow,” Darcy said with a yawn. “I need to tap out, Bucky will come out and take watch in a bit, thank you for covering the dog-watch for us.”

Sandra shuddered a bit as the swap kicked in, but the pain in her forehead lessened and the world became a white, fuzzy shape around her. Jean, Aunt Jillian and her cousins were standing beside her, and a scruffy man in a red leather duster was freaking out to the other side.

“Woah, woah, calm down Peter, we’ve got time,” Cousin Darcy said gently. She was good at that. “This is Dr. Jean Grey, she’s here to help us get you where you need to be and maybe also not melt Sandi’s brain while we’re at it.”

“Wait, I was hurting her?” he asked. His voice was high and tight, and his eyes were wider, showing a margin of white. Fear, Sandra thought.

“It’s okay, you didn’t know, and we’re fixing it,” she told him, reaching out to touch his hand. He looked at her with something like fear, but different.

“You’re so… young.”

“We start the swaps at the same age,” she reminded him. “It’s only been a few month, my time. That’s part of why everyone was worried enough to bring in Jean. But now that she’s here, we can spread the work out. What was happening when we swapped?”

“We were in a bar in Kree-controlled space, but things were pretty tense. I think someone who was in favor of the peace agreement was about to get himself killed and that would kick off a bar fight. Barfights on stations sometimes, a lot of the time, actually, have casualty lists.”

“So that’s me or Bucky,” Cousin Darcy said, obviously doing her people-genius thing. “Do you prefer the person who ends the fight before it becomes a fight, or the person who makes sure nobody starts that fight again?”

“There is no way to stop people from fighting about the stupid peace treaty, it’s all anyone talks about,” Peter sighed, rubbing his face. “Send the person who stops it from getting out of control now.”

“Okay, Bucky, you’re on. Channel that inner suave mother-trucker and come home safe. We’ll play hot-potato with the ERB.”

“ERB?” Peter asked as Bucky shimmered out of sight.

“Einstein-Rosen Bridge,” Sandra explained. “A portal or wormhole capable of circumventing large gaps of space and time. We think that’s what lets the body swapping happen, a small ERB delivering electrical impulses from one person’s brain to another, trading controls.”

“That is super creepy,” Peter said with a shudder. “You’ve got a portal jumper inside your skull?”

“So do you,” Sandra said, and shrugged. “We all do, except Jean, she’s just a telepath.”
“I’ve never been so pleased to have a skill discounted in my life,” Jean said dryly. “I’m one of the three strongest telepaths on the planet. My brain counts as a weapon of mass destruction in some countries. But here, I’m ‘just’ a telepath.”

“We’ve seen worse,” Cousin Darcy said casually and Peter swallowed a strangled sound. Cousin Steve gave her a look and Cousin Darcy shrugged. “We have, alien invasions, home-brew human-enhancement super villains, two separate infinity stones, three or four types of mind control and a handful of actual weapons of mass destruction. We’ve certainly seen worse than one multiple doctorate school teacher with mind-reader skills.”

“You people are very strange,” Peter commented. Sandra smiled at him.

“Thank you! It got hard after the whole world got weird, what with aliens and Nazis with giant flying doom machines, but we do our best to keep up the general lag.”

“Stop breaking your Swap, missy,” Cousin Steve scolded. “You want him alive.”

“Sorry Cousin Steve,” Sandra chorused.

“And Yondu thinks I’m a handful,” Peter muttered.

“You are a handful,” Jean said firmly. “I can see it. Sandra’s just a menace.”

<> Bucky blinked his eyes twice to clear the fuzz of a strange new body he’d never been in from his brain. He was watching the argument forming, seemingly no time had passed, or Peter’s companions just didn’t notice the gap. After pinning down the best pressure point, he offered to go get another round. The blue skinned man with the metal mohawk looked at him oddly.

“What’s the matter, boy?”

“Flip-flop, I’m a swap,” Bucky said a touch too fast to be caught by anyone who didn’t already understand. The blue guy nodded and passed him a metal and plastic bar.

“That’s your money, Sandi, I just keep it for Pete ‘cause the damn fool would lose his head if it weren’t attached.”

Bucky weighed the risks and benefits and nodded. At the bar he ordered another round for his table and a refill for a pretty woman with feathers for hair at the end of the bar, close to the forming fight. She accepted it, and he sauntered over, using all his history as a ladies man to signal his intent.

“Hey, Dollface, you here with anyone?”

“I’m here with him,” she said, waving at one of the arguing men. “But that might change soon.”

“He’s a real fool if he can’t see that the beautiful dame he brought here is far more interesting than politics,” Bucky said sincerely, letting his voice drift louder. “It’s a shame to see such a vision of loveliness left to drink by herself. If he doesn’t come back to keep you company soon, I’d suggest looking for it elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere being with you?” she asked, but Bucky could see the man was glaring daggers at him. Fight over politics successfully avoided, he turned his mind to avoiding a fight over her.

“If that’s what you’d like Ma’am,” he said, before dropping his voice. “I always like to talk to pretty
ladies when I’m away from my own, it makes me feel less lonely. Men are fine pals and such, I love my crew same as the next guy, but if I go too long without getting to talk to a lady, I start missing my Darcy something fierce.”

“Darcy?” she asked.

“A firecracker, and gorgeous as you. Smart, too. She likes studying how people make friends, but she’s working with hard science scientists now. Prevent them blowing up the labs and things.” It was a drastic simplification, but he couldn’t bring up Darcy’s Political Science major without restarting that fight.

“Oh, that’s interesting, does she do any work in genetics? I’m a hobby geneticist myself.”

“Not really, the closest that comes is a little work in experimental biology, but most of that goes through really strict screening. Nobody wants a repeat of the exploding ficus incident, and we don’t trust the people who want a repeat of the thing with the gamma rays.”

“Gamma rays?” the woman asked. “Who in the galaxy would work with gamma rays? They’re incredibly dangerous!”

“Well, we know that now,” Bucky defended. “But then again, Terrans be crazy, like they say at home. I think I’m going to beat feet real quick now, it looks like your fella figured out he had more to lose than an argument. Au revoir, mademoiselle. Enchanté.”

She giggled, and turned to reassure her man that she hadn’t been being harassed or poached. Bucky faded back to his seat and took a small cautious sip of his drink.

“You ain’t Sandi,” the blue man said.

“No, Sir,” Bucky admitted, feeling around for the link. “My name’s Bucky. Sandi wasn’t handling the transfers well, so we called in a psychic to let some of us take the load. I don’t know how it’ll effect Peter, he can’t exactly escape the swaps like she can. I guess maybe if you’ve got space ships you can also get fancy medicines to help fix the strain? Or keep him out of life-or-death situations so we never have to swap, that’d work. The worry with her had to do with the speed of the recurring swaps, all in a few months, no real rest time.”

“We can at least try. I’m Yondu.”

“Nice to meet you, Yondu.” Bucky felt the tug of the link. “I’m going back now, see ya ‘round.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Glamour: in this case, a spell to change how he looks. He did it in Thor 2 when he had trashed the room when Thor recruited him.
Dog-watch: a late watch that covers a section of time sort of in the middle of usual sleep hours. It's less than liked.
Hot-potato: a game of tossing something back and forth to keep it up in the air.
Portal jumper: the name I've given the mechanism for the 'jumping' in spaceships.
Glaring daggers: looking angrily at someone.
The exploding ficus incident: Maya's work on Extremis prior to Killian warping it.
Beat feet: leave quickly.
Au revoir, mademoiselle. Enchanté.: Good bye, Miss. Nice to meet you.

Notes:
Remember the ERB's that make the swaps can stretch across time and space. The swap Sandi has is almost perfectly even with her in time because he's so far away in space that the stretch is pulled all on that axis and it's rough on her.

In this 'verse, the X-Men are mainly a team that pulls other mutants out of the direct line of fire and sometimes helps with humanitarian aid, a lot like Team Rubicon but with mutants. As such, Jean is mostly a teacher and a child psychologist/geneticist.

Margaret either never had a swap or her swap was so short it got missed in one of those ten thousand moments we sort of blank out in our memories. That doesn't mean she can't help, she's excellent at making sure mundane details are taken care of.

Darcy uses one of those white robot remote platform things like in Agents of SHIELD season one, the episode in China with the blowing up guy, who in this 'verse was a mutant that didn't want to go with the X-Men and was put on the Index because he didn't get out fast enough.

I've got a lot of thoughts about why Loki has never used Lorelei or Amora's tricks on Thor, and I'm going with that is would take an absurd amount of specialization to do that and it was easier to just trick him instead of enslave him. To that end, I'm assuming one of his gifts from the Apples of Idunn is being a magical sink, capable of absorbing quite a lot of power before it affects him and lessening the results.

Weapons of Mass Destruction are scary no matter what, but People of Mass Destruction are less scary in some cases. Darcy knows Jean doesn't actually like using her powers too much, like many telepaths, she's mentally fastidious out of self-protection and doesn't want others mucking up her brain-space.

The feather hair is a reference to the Shi'ar, a Marvel universe alien race.

In space, you too can be a hobby geneticist. It's a bit like being a hobby engineer, only instead of model trains you build model plants or critters.

Gamma rays are notable in real science for being formed during the fusion process at the heart of stars. They really should have straight up killed not just Bruce, but EVERYONE in the building, possibly the campus, during the incident. I see it as Hulk showing his true colors in the moment of his birth, taking the hits like a true tank-type hero.

Teaser:

“The life of a Ravager does not lend itself to a suit and tie,” Peter retorted.
“Neither does the life of a spy-factory child, and yet my kids ended up with a certain
degree of personal responsibility and impulse control,” Darcy muttered.
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

Time-lines meet and the dominoes begin to fall toward the forming of an exceptional, and exceptionally unlikely, team of heroes.

Chapter Notes

EDIT: I forgot the Love Fest, my bad. I'll do that now.

Love Fest! To ValkyriePhoenix, Snowecat, minishadowsoul, tigrislilium, Notashamed, Beth_Mac, Shadows_of_Shemai, Tsita, quadrad, Joey99, Selene_Aduial, SionnachOiche3, and hhhellcat.

EDIT 2: Extra thanks to quadrad for pointing out a fact error in the notes about Yondu. It has been updated and also I now get why Yondu was such a horrible parent in the first movie.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve was awoken in the middle of the night by a pulling on his brain. He grunted into the pillow and opened up the mental door that led to their shared space. After several missions into Peter’s life, it was no longer a blank, open space of fuzzy white potential, instead it held elements of each of their lives. Comfy sofas from the Tower outlined a cuddle pit from a high-end spaceship, a bookcase against one wall was filled with books sourced from Sandi’s memory and Jean’s psychic skills peeking over the shoulders of library users, a workshop area with tools let Peter and Bucky sometime tinker out plans for upgrades to their gear, and a large cork board opposite that held all of Darcy and Jane’s bridge research carefully recreated from the digital versions. So far Jane had only been in here once, to check the accuracy of the equations before they let Sandi lock it into place, but she had a unique mental feeling. Thor was often there, but doing nothing, he seemed to find the place relaxing to the point it put him to sleep. He wasn’t asleep now, although he was in his usual place in the cuddle pit. Nobody was asleep, they were all alert and looking around for the trouble that woke them.

“What’s the emergency?” he asked, feeling grumpy, but on-edge.

“I don’t know,” Sandi cried. “I can feel I need to go do something, that he’s in danger, but I don’t know what the heck is happening and he’s not here! He’s supposed to be here!”

“Well, we’ll see about that,” Jean said tartly. She raised a hand to her temple in concentration, and a wavering doorway appeared. “Peter Jason Quill, you take two seconds to get your mental rear in here and tell us why Sandra is having a panic attack.”

“Geez, I’m here, I’m here, what’s the rush?” he asked, appearing in the door. “I was in no danger. I was, to be exact, in an art gallery. Not even an art gallery I planned to rob. What’s going on?”
“I could feel the link go all tight,” Sandi said, half sobbing. Peter, to his credit, looked ashamed as she launched at his ribs to hug him. “I was scared for you.”

“Well, I don’t know what caused it, I was just strolling along looking at sculptures. I thought I could mind-poof something nice in here, to complement Steve’s Terran Masters collection,” he said, waving at all the art Steve had put on the walls.

Darcy hmm’d and went to look at her timeline. “Peter, what year is it, your time?”

“Oh, uh, let’s see, take Galactic Standard, multiply by five, carry the six, coefficient for Earth is three point seventeen… 2014? Middle-ish?”

“Well, that’s what did it. We’re in the same time zones. I had that happen with Steve and Bucky too, except they both knew they were headed towards me and when we could finally do direct time swaps we were focusing on other problems. Also, what the heck with your emotional progression, my dude? You’re thirty five, your brain should not still be compatible with a fifteen year old.”

“The life of a Ravager does not lend itself to a suit and tie,” Peter retorted.

“Neither does the life of a spy-factory child, and yet my kids ended up with a certain degree of personal responsibility and impulse control,” Darcy muttered. “At least tell me Yondu took me up on the suggestion to get those parenting guides I recommended to him?”

“You mean the ones he went out of our way to get and convinced Taserface were Terran mind-control books to keep me from blowing the Eclector up? Yeah, he got them. It was funny watching him read What to Expect When You’re Expecting.”

“Not one that I would have put high on the list, but it’ll work,” Darcy said approvingly. “So, I think we’ve settled what was happening. Sandi, you’re good with that?”

“No dying,” Sandi said firmly to Peter, strong arming him back to look at his face. “It’s a rule. No dying.”

“Okay, Lil’ Bit, I got it. No dying,” Peter said. Steve moved to walk him to his mind-door as Darcy comforted Sandi.

“She’ll be okay, she’s just young,” Steve said. “She worries about you. We all do, you’re family. Just try to stay safe for a bit, give her some space.”

“Space is about all I got,” Peter said. “I gotta go, Yondu and I were going to talk to a broker about a deal. It’s not even shady, it’s a legit recovery mission.”

“I believe you,” Steve said calmly. Peter seemed to have the idea that Steve didn’t approve of his piracy. Which was nuts, they’d all heard the Ravager’s Code at least once from Yondu and Peter quoted it pretty often; Steve knew where the lines had been drawn and he mostly figured it worked so why mess with it? It wasn’t like the Ravagers went out of their way to be mean to others. “Come back to us in one piece, that’s all we ask.”

Peter nodded and stepped out the door. Jean let the shared mindscape fade around them and Steve blinked his eyes back in his own body.

“Go to sleep, Punk,” Bucky murmured. “Darcy still has watch.”

“M’kay,” Steve mumbled into Bucky’s shoulder and fell back into sleep.
Peter shifted nervously as he landed on Morag’s surface. He didn’t want to betray Yondu. He really didn’t. But Sandra’s life could be on the line, he needed to buy some peace and quiet and the only way he could afford all the bribes to set up a new identity would be to take the full cut. And the only way he’d feel alright about that would be doing the full job. He wouldn’t cheat another Ravager out of credits they’d bled for, but he could get here a little too soon and do the job alone.

It wasn’t a heavily guarded vault, it was just a dead world, killed ages ago when the people here helped their planet over the heat threshold and turned it into one big ocean. And now the once-in-300-year chance to access the usually flooded temple was here. This place wasn’t that dangerous. It wasn’t.

It was creepy as fuck.

Peter shook his head to focus and began sweeping the ground with a holographic map, to find the safe paths into the temple. His music helped him focus, but for once he really wished he and Sandra had figured out the co-piloting thing Steve, Bucky, and Darcy did. It was freaky looking, but it would help him feel not as alone. Of course, she’d probably just tease him about dancing to keep his legs limber and his nerves at a low simmer. She could be a brat sometimes, it was part of why he thought of her like a little sister.

The vault would have been a lot easier with help, but the modified gravity mine worked as advertised, pulling the orb from the stasis column. Easy as pie. Actually, a little too easy. He tensed half a second before the merc team showed up.

“Drop it!” commanded a darker skinned one, maybe Kree, certainly modified. The Sakaaran grunts made him lean toward Kree, but with so much mechanical crap in the way and the lack of that trademark blue, it was hard to tell.

“Uh…hey,” Peter said, breathing out slowly. If he could keep this calm, Sandra wouldn’t be called in and he could still make good on his promise to give her space.

“Drop it, now!”

“Hey, cool, man,” Peter said, dropping his prize. “No problem, no problem at all.”

“How do you know about this?” asked the leader as the Sakaaran grunts took aim at him.

“I don’t even know what that is,” Peter said honestly before lying. “I’m just a junker, man. I was just…just checking stuff out.”

“You don’t look like a junker. You’re wearing Ravager garb!”

“This is just an outfit, man. I won it off a guy in a game of Hoopka.” A Sakaaran prodded him with a gun and Peter snapped. “Ninja Turtle, you better stop poking me.”

“What is your name?” demanded the Kree. Peter was willing to call it. He’d spent enough time with Yondu to know Kree arrogance anywhere.

“My name is Peter Quill, okay? Dude, chill out.”

“Move!”

“Why?”
“Ronan may have questions for you.”

Not good, Peter thought. Not good at all. Ronan was a nutcase and nobody who wasn’t Kree or a Kree slave-race survived his kinds of questions.

“Hey, you know what? There’s another name you might know me by,” Peter said. He needed to keep himself out of these guy’s hands for Sandra’s sake. He channeled every inch of badass into his voice to distract them as he thumbed the controls on his belt. “Star-Lord.”

“Who?”

Not the planned reaction, but Peter was willing to roll with it. He switched from badass to whiny brat in a blink. “Star-Lord, man. Legendary outlaw? Guys?”

“Move!” the Kree demanded again.

“Oh, forget this,” Peter sighed and began an attack.

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Darcy dove through the door that represented the link as Peter slapped her hand. Tagging out had proven the most effective way of handling the choices. She rolled in his body and came up with his pistols ready. Noting the face of the one taking aim at her, she fired at his guards and triggered the rocket boots, adding a layer of white-hot heat to her kicks. When a blast removed a section of wall, she twisted an insectoid fighter to the ground with her thighs and kicked off through the hole.

“Peter, you’re a fucking menace,” she growled as she sprinted towards the Milano. As she settled into the seat, she realized the flaw in Peter’s choice.

“I can’t fly this. Tag out.” She flew through the door in their mindscape and tagged Bucky.

“Spaceship, that’s you.”

Panting, she looked at Peter, who was sitting sheepishly beside Sandi.

“It was going to be my last job for a while,” he defended. “The pay-out can cover a long rest, so she’s not in as much danger. I was trying to be responsible.”

“Uh huh,” Darcy said dryly. “And the Putty Patrollers trying to incinerate you?”

“Umm,” Peter said. “The Sakaarans? Sort of bug-like, grey, and not real tough?”

“Yeah,” Darcy said, rubbing her temples. It was useless in a mind-scape, but she still did it. “Sorry, forgot you narrowly missed the glorious cheese of the 90’s. How did you end up making them that mad?”

“I stole something they stole from me, after I’d reclaimed it from a dead world.”

“There’s nothing to explain,” Sandi said with a grin. “They’re trying to kidnap what he’s rightfully stolen.”

“I can’t stay mad when she defends you using Princess Bride quotes,” Darcy told Peter. “Say thank you to Sandi and come help me with a side project I’m working on.”

“Thank you Sandra,” Peter said sincerely. “What’s the project?”

“My brother has let me know one of our big bads we’ll have to face eventually is known better out in
space. He can’t say the name yet, too much trauma and we have yet to confirm removal of any kind of tracking device or spell or whatever. I’m trying to figure it out from half a dozen clues. You’re going to go over them with me. Sandi, I need him to drive on your side so I can show him my notes, is that cool?”

“Sure thing,” Sandi said, waving. “I’m going to nap.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Putty Patrollers: the main minion race from Power Rangers in the 1990's.

Notes:
There's a bit of a time jump happening here. For reference, last chapter happened about July 7, 2014 with Peter's half happening around April 3. This chapter starts on July 31, 2014, the battle happening the next day.

Mind-palaces are useful tools for memory improvement, but I'm using it here for the shared middle space between six swappers, held in place by a psychic and a mage, and often occupied by an energy sink. It has to be comfortable, fortunately Jean is very good at what she does.

Steve's Terran Masters collection is actually pretty eclectic. It has things from when he was in France and helped out the Monuments Men, things from the MOMA he likes, Norman Rockwell prints, and everything in between.

Peter is trying to deal with the fact that Steve from Brooklyn and Captain America, Sentinel of Liberty are two very different people, but he's not doing well. His mental image of Steve is sort of Mirror-Verse!Yondu, and he feels his life choices so far are disappointing to Steve because he's stayed in the lines Yondu drew... mostly. Steve meanwhile is looking at the kid's pantry and going "I would steal too if I had this nonsense to work with, do you even have fruit in space? You should get fruit."

In the movie, Peter acts like he's never heard of Ronan. That makes zero sense to me, as Ronan is a famous terrorist and Kree fanatic and Yondu, Peter's Space-Dad was raised mainly in Kree space (after being sold into slavery by his parents as a kid, holy crap these people's backgrounds are depressing when I look them up). They'd never have met, but Yondu for sure would have warned his kid about the crazy nutjob Kree mash-up of Hitler and Bin Laden. I'm assuming that was him playing dumb, and I may keep it, but he DOES know who Ronan is.

Darcy and Peter both speak in childhood pop-culture references, but his are dated to about 1988, when his mom died and he left Earth, whereas she pulls from the 1990's and early 2000's. So he calls Sakaarans "Ninja Turtles" and she calls them "Putty Patrollers". They're a 'client race' of the Kree, basically serving as expendable redshirts for Kree military expansion. They die rather easily, which is why Darcy connects them to the easily killed minions of the bad guys in Power Rangers.

Darcy is going to have Peter help her research the Infinity Stones in a hope of circling around to Thanos' name even though neither one knows Peter's going to ever get within a light-year of him. Mostly just because he's more acquainted with the Galactic Criminal
Nutcase Who's Who list. Guess who's going to know a LOT more about Infinity Gems when the time comes?

Teaser:

Maybe Terrans just stuck together better than they did with others. They’d never really gotten too far out into the stars, nobody would know if that was true yet or not.
Bucky tried to like Peter, he really did. But sometimes that boy was just too wild, even for him.

“Bereet! Look, I’m gonna be totally honest with you,” Bucky lied, knowing it was probably true and also feeling a bit vindictive. “I forgot you were here.”

She looked at him with shock and Bucky felt a bit like a dick. “Hey, I’m sorry. You wanna slap me? You deserve the chance.”

“No, I knew last night that you were a dangerous man, Peter. You told me you would likely break my heart and I chose to live wildly anyway. I forgive you.”

“You are worth ten of any Peter Quill out there, Bereet,” Bucky said, pausing to watch the news as someone mentioned the Kree-Xandar treaty.

“Scattered riots broke out across the Kree Empire today protesting the recent peace treaty signed by the Kree Emperor and Xandar’s Nova Prime.”

“Peter, you have call,” Bereet said and Bucky tensed. He could not fake being Peter well enough for anyone who had his number, not in front of Bereet, and he couldn’t risk the gap time to swap out with a better actor.

“No, wait, don’t!” he called as she pressed a button. Yondu appeared, scowling at the camera.

“Quill?” he asked. He sounded unsure, and Bucky couldn’t blame him, seeing the swaps happen was strange and disjointed, and certain amount of confusion was to be expected.

“Hey, Yondu.”

“I’m here on Morag,” he said angrily. “Ain’t no Orb, ain’t no you.”

“Well, I was in the neighborhood. I thought I’d save you some time. But, like most of my bright ideas, it did not go as planned.”
“You in trouble?” Yondu asked, a bit softer, but only if you squinted for it.

“Maybe?” Bucky said with a left armed shrug. It was weird using an arm of flesh again. He did better with Darcy’s slender graceful arms or Steve’s giant tree trunks. Peter’s arms were too close to his own memories to keep them separate and he hated the blur between his body and someone else’s. “Let me drop Bereet off and we can talk then.”

“Go on, then boy, get,” Yondu ordered. Bucky still wasn’t sure if he’d known who he was talking to, but it didn’t much matter at that point.

“So, Bereet, I figure the least I owe you is a ride to anywhere you want to go,” he said, turning to the magenta-colored woman. “Taxi Milano is at your service, just name your destination.”

“I would like to go to Xandar please, Peter,” she said. “What is a taxi?”

“Vehicle service on Terra. I was born there,” Bucky said, trying to keep it honest for both of them as he updated the auto-pilot. “It’s nice, Terra, a bit strange in ways, but I like it all right.”

“Oh, yes, you were telling me about Terran media services last night!” Bereet beamed. “I had said I would very much like to make a documentary about your home and then we… got rather off topic.”

“Heh, yeah,” Bucky said awkwardly. “But I can tell you about it now, we’ve got a bit of a flight to get to Xandar. Documentaries can fall into news reporting or films, they used to be sort of the same thing, there were these little films that would play at the start of some picture. So you’d go to see a fiction piece that took the most time, but before it you’d get a short funny cartoon done with drawn pictures, and a newsreel, something that collected bits of important information. That was before we could transmit video into people’s homes and radio doesn’t cover certain things well.”

He spent what seemed like hours telling Bereet about the history of Terran recorded news and photojournalism and carefully avoiding anything that might turn the topic amorous. When they finally set down on Xandar, he was happy to hit the Milano’s bedroom after she was gone and sag into the link.

“Never make me do that again,” he told Peter sternly. “And never leave a sleeping dame in your ship while you’re on a job. It would serve you right if Bereet had stolen the Milano right from under your nose. Now go call Yondu and explain your dumbass plan, he’s worried sick.”

<^> Yondu Udonta was not having a good day.

First of all, his little Terran crew-member had run off with some Krylorian artist the night before and not shown up to the planning meeting. Peter was a grown man now, according to the books that scary woman who took his body sometimes told Yondu to get. He should have some level of responsibility. Not that he did, of course. Maybe Kraglin was right that he’d always been too willing to let Peter get away with things. Terrans were just so darn fragile compared to most of the Galaxy, and he had those big sad eyes and Yondu just couldn’t stay too mad.

Then, of course, there was more muttering they thought he didn’t hear about how he let Quill do anything he pleased. Yondu didn’t like the gossip, but it was better to let it happen and bite his tongue so he could mark who was planning to betray him later. He wanted to keep Horuz close for now, just in case, which was disappointing, the man was a good shot.

After that, they landed on Morag to see a busted up temple, and the fuel-sig of the Milano taking off like Peter’s ass was on fire. That right there was theft. Against a fellow Ravager. It was completely
against the code and Peter damn well knew that. He’d sure enough kept the units saved up from the things his Terran brain-partners did separate from his own cuts, even when it would have saved them all a lot of time and trouble. Maybe Terrans just stuck together better than they did with others. They’d never really gotten too far out into the stars, nobody would know if that was true yet or not. Then, he’d called Peter to try to track down where he was, and got one of the brain-partners instead, so no useful information about Peter’s foolishness could be had. And the odds that Peter would follow through on the partner’s promise were less than good.

“I told you when you picked that kid up, you should have delivered him like we was hired to do!” Horuz snarled. “He was cargo! You have always been soft on him.”

“You’re the only one I’m being soft on,” Yondu snarled back. “Now, don’t you worry about Mr. Quill, I’ve got a plan. Put a bounty on him. Forty-thousand. But I want him back alive, and then he and I will have a talk about things like the Code and why you don’t steal from another Ravager.”

Horuz smiled nastily and Yondu suppressed a shiver of disgust. This was what he got from running a crew so bad they barely even qualified as real Ravagers. But he brought that on himself, and he’d deal with it.

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<SNIP>

Sandra sighed as she slipped from their shared mind-palace into the regular world. “Peter’s about to do his things, isn’t he?” she asked Cousin Bucky.

“What makes you say that, Kartoshka?” Cousin Natasha asked. “Oh, and I made you a smoothie. Jane said you need to keep your calorie intake up, the ERB is using up a lot of energy, most of it from you. It’s strawberry coconut.”

Sandra took the tall glass and sipped on the bendy straw Cousin Natasha had put in the top. The smoothie was good, but she needed to talk about their plan for the thing. “What do I do when Peter does his thing?” she asked.

“Save him,” Aunt Jillian said calmly from her complicated yoga thing she did to relax after a swap. “That’s the job, kiddo.”

“I think she means specifics,” Cousin Darcy said dryly. “And specifics have to wait until we know what his job is. Unfortunately, his thing isn’t in the past and so we can’t just look it up.”

“First things first,” Mom said firmly. “Everyone drink a glass of water, and eat a sandwich. I have cold ham and cheddar with spring greens on rye, hot sundried tomato caprese on wheat, and tortilla wrapped turkey and fruit.”

Sandra took a ham sandwich and peeled the crust off with her fingers before taking a bite. She sipped on her smoothie between bites as her cousins inhaled several sandwiches and wraps. Steve and Bucky had big appetites, it made her mom extra happy to feed them. Food took the priority at first, but by Steve’s fourth sandwich, Bucky started to dissect the wrap he’d picked that time to recreate it and everyone else was mostly done. Sandra still had a bit of smoothie left, but it was fine to move into the den to get more comfortable.

She picked a spot on the big squishy sofa beside Cousin Natasha and leaned on the red-head’s shoulder while everyone else got settled. Cousin Bucky was talking in quiet, sharp tones with Cousin Darcy, and Cousin Steve was talking with Dad about something involving paint that she didn’t really care about. Aunt Jillian and Mom were arguing about Sandra not going back to school
“You said you thought your swap was coming to an end, Kartoshka?” Cousin Natasha asked gently, prompting Sandra to look at her.

“Yeah, it’s just a feeling, but I notice how people act about the swaps. Sometimes they don’t want to tell me the things they see or do. That’s more now with Peter. And Cousin Darcy was really mad, and cousin Bucky took a long time on his end, and I don’t know what’s off, but there’s something off.”

“Trust your instincts, Kartoshka,” Cousin Natasha said firmly. They’re better than you give them credit for, and that can save your life.”

“Thanks for trusting me, Natasha,” Sandra said quietly. “It’s scary, knowing I’ve got to save someone’s life, and I wasn’t even picked to do it because I can do something better, I was picked just because he’s really far away.”

“You think Mama didn’t have times she doubted she could do what was needed?” Cousin Natasha asked, one red brow arching high on her face. “She spent a long time with Jane thinking she’d got Steve and Papa killed.”

“But Darcy is a superhero,” Sandra pointed out. “It's different.”

“Nyet,” Cousin Natasha said firmly. “It’s never easy to be the hero, but it’s always worth it to be the better version of you. And it is you we need. I don’t put much faith in Gods, but whatever force connects your family to the people who need them does a good job picking. Come, we’re going to go talk with the Dyadi about this.”

“What?” Sandra let Cousin Natasha pull her into the sunporch with it’s big windows where Cousin Loki preferred to relax. He didn’t like small or dark places. Loki was currently sitting on the floor with Thor behind him on one side of a bentwood lover’s chair, braiding his hair back.

“Dyadya Loki, we have a problem,” Cousin Natasha declared. “Imposter syndrome in the Kartoshka.”

“You did the right thing,” he said, and tapped Thor’s knee. “Go, this is for the Shadows of the family.”

“Should I send in Darcy and Bucky?” Thor asked.

“No, not yet.” Loki took Sandra’s hands and moved to the two-person seat. She circled it and sat facing him across the middle arm. “Tell me.”

She told him. She explained her fears and her feelings of inadequacy, and the way it burned when Peter chose someone else to save him. She let all of it out, somehow unable to bring herself to lie to his open look of concern and his warm green eyes.

“It’s easy to feel less than impressive when your family is made of very impressive people, Lady Sandra, but that is not what is happening here,” he said. “I am older, and therefore privy to some of the things my sister would not share with you. She seeks to guard you from being soul-wounded, as she wishes someone could have protected her when she was in your place. I don’t agree with her, your mind is much stronger than she believes, but it is that way with older family members, she remembers you younger than you are.”

“Ugh, I hate that she’s treating me like a child!” Sandra groaned.
“I’m not treating you like a child,” Cousin Darcy said from the door. “I’m treating you like Private Higgins, who was two years too young but got sent to the front anyway and I led over thirty miles of enemy territory while we were both half dead. I’m treating you like Nurse Bauer who cried when we found a dead cat and got called Jew-killer by men during surgery when the anesthesia ran out. I’m treating you like the people who should never have seen what I had to see, because I don’t want you seeing that. If I had my way, nobody would see that.”

“Dollface, ease up on the emotional lever,” Cousin Bucky said, pulling her into a hug. “Sandra, we’ll try to increase our after-mission debriefs, okay? I don’t want you doing hand to hand yet, and honestly I like the sniping, but we’ll make you a bigger part of the job, promise.”

Sandra nodded as she watched Cousin Darcy cry for the first time. Maybe avoiding the things that broke you like that was smart.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Krylorian: Bereet's species.
Kartoshka: potato, Nat's nickname for Sandra.
ERB: Einstein-Rosen Bridge.
Nyet: No.
Dyadi: uncles.
Dyadya: uncle.
Soul-wounded: traumatized.

Notes:
Bucky is trying to tell Yondu the truth about what happened, but he can't because he doesn't know Bereet well enough to bring her in to the secret. Yondu knows Bucky is hamstrung by this and he's irritated about that, but he doesn't blame Bucky for it.

In the comics, Bereet is an artist who uses her people's recording technology to create docudramas of people's first hand reactions to things. She mostly appears in the Hulk comics, actually.

In this canon, Yondu is still running the exiled crew that gave up the more moralistic side of the Ravager Code. That said, he's grown a fair deal as a person, and he picked up a few things about mental well being studying parenting guides and child psych books for Peter. He's aware his crew is half on his side and half about ready to mutiny, and he's watching that problem carefully. Horuz is on the "might mutiny" side of things, Kraglin is on the "ride or die" side.

Note Yondu only says "talk". He never promises to beat or torture Peter. He just... doesn't correct Horuz' assumption. Loki isn't the only sneaky alien around here.

Sandra's main problem here is that she was having a need for emotional reassurance and her family leans heavily to problem-solvers. They want to do the right thing, but her problem is not like a nail, but they're really used to hammers. It ties in to why they got the roles in Swaps that they did. Jillian and Darcy were paired with people with concrete issues about tending to die. Sandra had to form an empathetic relationship with a man who lives in outer space among alien thieves so he didn't go bugnuts before his big
moment, because Peter's world saving is rooted in hard choices and an understanding of ethics beyond personal safety. Steve's was too, sort of, but he was always going to try to do that. Peter was more up in the air.

The lover's chair looks like this. Lover's chairs were designed back in ye olden days for courting couples so they could sit close and whisper to each other in a semblance of privacy from chaparones, without opening the door to outright canoodling. Bucky loves the ability to side beside and face to face, so he's ordered this one for their apartment at the Tower. Shh, it's a surprise for Darcy and Steve.

Thor and Loki are starting to repair the damage that was done, and part of that is reasonable boundaries, like Thor leaving when asked.

There were a lot of cases of kids too young to legally enlist making it into the Army. Private Higgins represents them. There were also cases of nurses with German last names receiving tons of abuse from soldiers, regardless of their position on anything in Germany or German politics. Nurse Bauer represents them. Darcy is accustomed to mass fallout psychologically speaking, her umbrella is very wide.

Teaser:

"WHAT IN THE FUCKING FUCKITY FUCK WAS THAT!!" she screeched. She wasn’t proud of herself, but raccoons and opossums were serious business in Missouri, even the urban areas, and she had no intention of pissing off any alien life that even remotely resembled the North American Drop Bear.
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

- Peter gets in trouble and goes to jail.
- Darcy tries to help and gets in a fight.
- Gamora gets what she wanted... sort of.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To quadrad, Joey99, ffaddiction711, Tsita, Maedae84, Shadows_of_Shemai, Beth_Mac, ValkyriePhoenix, ClockWeasel, Snowecat, Notashamed, SionnachOiche3, hhhellcat, tigrislilium, and Selene_Aduial.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter growled at the Broker’s closed door. Really, all he was doing was giving the guy a heads up, he didn’t have to be rude about it. “Hey, we had a deal, bro!”

“What happened?” he heard a voice ask, and he turned to look at the outstandingly attractive green woman leaning on the building.

“Uh…this guy just backed out of a deal on me,” he said quickly. Hey, maybe he could turn this shit-show into something fun. “If there’s one thing I hate, it’s a man without integrity. Peter Quill. People call me Star-Lord.”

“You have the bearing of a man of honor,” she said, and Peter racked his panicked mind for how to be smooth with someone who was treating him as more than the dangerous out of towner, the Kevin Bacon in Footloose guy. He tried tossing and catching the ball he hadn’t sold, aiming for relaxed, modest. Something between Bucky’s swagger and Steve’s aww-shucks thing that Darcy liked so much.

“Well, you know, I wouldn’t say that. People say it about me,” he lied. She seemed impressed. “They say it all the time, but it’s not something I would ever say about myself.”

She hummed a bit and stole the orb. Peter froze and hauled on his internal link.

“What now?” Darcy asked, clearly grumpy about the interruption. Her face had a very specific type of frustration on it, a type Peter tried to avoid ever seeing, because it meant danger, usually for his man-bits.

“Uh, sorry, were you guys… uh,” Peter felt the rising blush, even though in the time-stop of the link that was impossible. “Anyways, a green, very scary woman is trying to steal the payday I was going to use to get a safer identity. It’s a metal ball, about like a baseball. Help?”

“You are so lucky the universe needs you,” she sighed. “Who had homicidal female?”
Bucky flipped the whiteboard to the betting sheet side. “You owe Loki and Natasha a gift basket each, Steve owes me a spa day, and Margaret owes Jillian a steak. Also, I called not-it. I’m not fighting another you, and once exposed to you, that’s the bar where his scary-lady base is set.”

“Fine. Deal with him,” Darcy sighed and launched herself through the door. Peter glanced sheepishly at Steve, and Bucky, who’d apparently been tapped for this.

“Where’s Lil’ Bit?” he asked.

“It’s 4 am our time,” Steve said sourly. “You already know why we’re awake, but we aren’t usually loud enough to wake the house. I assume Jean is trying to be discrete about it and also get some rest by not hauling everyone in.”

“Oh.” He shifted on his feet. That was way more than he wanted to know about Captain America’s private life. “Well, this shouldn’t take long, Darcy is really badass.”

“We’re aware,” Steve said dryly.

“And this is why the kid thinks you judge him,” Bucky sighed. “Relax a bit for me, Punk. I’d like to have this wrap up quickly, but you know Sandi’s been warning that she feels it’s about time. We won’t get much sleep when that happens. Who knows how long it’ll take?”

“You’re right, Jerk,” Steve sighed. “I’m sorry, Peter, you don’t deserve me getting fussy with you, you’re doing your part by calling for help when you need it. Also, you may want to keep an eye out for world-changing things to do, Sandi’s intuition has been telling her we’re getting close to whatever your thing is. Since we’re on the same time-zone, I think it’s okay to tell you that. It’s not technically a spoiler.”

“Thanks,” Peter said, blinking. Captain America just apologized to a Ravager. The Galaxy was a strange place where strange things happened. “Is it just me or does this seem to be taking a while? Darcy’s usually pretty snappy on the violence bits.”

“Peter, I hate you,” she said from behind him. “Also, ninety percent sure you’re going to Space Jail. We were mugged by a tree and a raccoon.”

“A what now?”

“Did I fucking stutter?” she demanded. “You were attacked by a tree that misgendered your assailant, and a talking raccoon with a gun that I really want to steal. God, the things I could do with that gun…”

“And that’s our cue to take Darcy and get out of the telepath-monitored mind-scape before something R-rated happens,” Bucky said quickly. “Bye Peter!”

“Bye?” Peter said and blinked his eyes.

“Hey! If it isn’t Star-Prince,” said a Nova Corpsman. One he recognised.

“Star-Lord,” he corrected. God he hated being picked up by Dey, he was just too friendly sometimes. At least he didn’t hit.

“Oh, sorry. Lord.” He turned to his partner after checking Peter’s cuffs. “I picked this guy up a while back for petty theft. He’s got a code name.”

“Come on, man,” Peter sighed. “It’s a… it’s an outlaw name.”
Just relax, pal. It’s cool to have a code name,” Dey reassured. “It’s not that weird.”

Darcy rolled out of the mind-space and into Peter’s body, and tossed an electric bolo at the green woman’s feet. she went down, as expected, and Darcy jogged up to snatch the ball back.

“Get your own!” she hissed as the green lady tried to scissor-twist her feet. Darcy jumped back, readying her stance. “Oh no you don’t.”

“This wasn’t the plan,” the woman said with an air of resignation. Darcy decided to think of her as Elphaba for reasons. Also because accidentally calling her “green chick” was probably a bad idea.

“It wasn’t on my to-do list either, but we all gotta deal,” Darcy said. “Why are you trying to rob me?”

“I need it to…” Darcy never learned what Elphaba needed the ball for, because a large mass of fur came flying at them and she hit the deck.

“WHAT IN THE FUCKING FUCKITY FUCK WAS THAT!!” she screeched. She wasn’t proud of herself, but raccoons and opossums were serious business in Missouri, even the urban areas, and she had no intention of pissing off any alien life that even remotely resembled the North American Drop Bear.

“Put him in the bag. Put him in the bag!” the raccoon yelled in a rough, almost New York accent. A massive vine bent down and Darcy realized what she was seeing. It wasn’t a vine wrapping around her attacker, it was a hand. The hand of an Ent. “No! Not her, him! Learn genders, man,” the raccoon shouted. Darcy moved to evade, and she saw Elphaba bite him. On one hand, enemy of my enemy, and she ought to root for the talking raccoon. On the other, that took guts.

“Biting?” he... or she assumed from the voice the raccoon was male... asked. “That’s not fair!”

“Life generally isn’t,” Darcy said casually, trying to play off her own inner freakout. She shoved the ball in a pocket and saluted sassily. “Bye now!”

“Take it easy!” she heard behind her, followed by “owch!”

Darcy picked up the pace, and dropped into a roll when the flying chunk of metal hit her back, letting it sail past her head and only losing a few feet of movement. That wasn’t a problem for Elphaba, who got Darcy down in a wrestling choke. Not her best field of battle.

“Fool. You should have learned,” Elphaba grunted.

“You attacked me, now it’s personal. I’m stubborn like that. It’s one of my issues.” Darcy grit out. She pulled a spare rocket pack from a pocket and hooked it to a convenient ankle. She hit the button and let the force carry Elphaba off. She stood up, planning to thank the Ent and Ranger Rick, when a bag descended over her head and she was hauled up.

“Quit smiling, you idiot. You’re supposed to be a professional,” said the raccoon. She wondered if the tree talked. “You gotta be kidding me. Hey!”

Darcy felt the bag drop, and she came out firing, then ran as fast as she could. She felt the shock hit and she tried to breathe through it.

“Don’t stay strong on my account,” the raccoon said. “Go on. Writhe, little man.”
“Fuuuck,” she gasped out “yyyooouuu.” She sort of processed other things happening as she got her nerves back, but the first real awareness she had was cops.

“Subject 89P13, drop your weapon,” said one over an intercom or pa system. Darcy almost flashed back to Stuttgart.

“Oh, crap,” said the Raccoon, and Darcy resolved to never ever call him Subject 89P13. Ever. She in fact, decided to dislike the person who called him that.

“Alright. Come on up,” said cop number two.

“…for endangerment to life and the destruction of property,” continued PA cop.

“Fuck all this,” Darcy muttered and faded into the mind-space. Peter could handle this.

<^>

Gamora attempted to remain calm as they booked and processed her. If nothing else, she was free. She just had to remember that. She was free of Thanos and his cruelty, free of service to madmen, free of constant torture and threats. Anything else was a blessing. Each free day would be a gift. It didn’t even matter that she wasn’t free, that she was trapped by the Nova Corps and being sent to prison like a common criminal. Gamora knew from now on, she would never bow to anyone ever again.

“I guess most of Nova Corps wanna uphold the laws, but these ones here, they’re corrupt and cruel,” said the small mammal. “But, hey, that’s not my problem. I ain’t gonna be here long. I’ve escaped twenty-two prisons, this one’s no different. You’re lucky the broad showed up, because otherwise, me and Groot would be collecting that bounty right now, and you’d be getting drawn and quartered by Yondu and those Ravagers.”

Gamora rolled her eyes. The creature would not stop talking. He should keep quiet, like she did. Keep his head down, instead of bragging about his escape record in front of guards he’d just insulted.

“I’ve had a lot of folks try to kill me over the years,” Quill insisted. “I ain’t about to be brought down by a tree and a talking raccoon.”

“What’s a raccoon?” the creature asked. Quill scoffed.

“What’s a raccoon? It’s what you are, stupid.”

“Ain’t no thing like me, ‘cept me.” The… not-raccoon, snorted, baring his sharp teeth. Gamora decided not to press that issue. Quill apparently saw a certain amount of wisdom in not pressing that either.

“So, this orb has a real shiny blue suitcase, Ark of the Covenant, Maltese Falcon sort of vibe. What is it?” Quill asked.

“I am Groot,” rumbled the Flora Colossus

“So what?” Quill asked. “What’s the orb?” Apparently the not-raccoon wasn’t the only one who had a hard time processing the idea of laying low.

“I have no words for an honorless thief,” she said when it became clear he meant for her to answer him.
“Pretty high and mighty coming from the lackey of a genocidal maniac,” said the not-raccoon. She looked sharply at him. “Yeah, I know who you are. Anyone who’s anyone knows who you are.”

“Yeah, we know who you are,” Quill lied. He never would have tried to impress her if he’d known. She was socially toxic, she’d known that for years. Only aliases and lies let her talk to anyone outside of Thanos’ circle of power.

“I am Groot,” said the Flora Colossus

“Yeah, you said that,” Quill

“I wasn’t retrieving the orb for Ronan,” Gamora said firmly. She wanted to make that very clear. “I was betraying him. I had an agreement to sell it to a third party.”

“I am Groot.”

“Well, that’s just as fascinating as the first eighty-nine times you told me that. What is wrong with Giving Tree, here?” Quill asked the tree-like alien’s friend.

“Well, he don’t know talking good like me and you. So his vocabulistics is limited to “I” and “am” and “Groot.” Exclusively in that order.” Gamora rolled her eyes. That was a very shallow truth. She’d studied the Flora Colossus, like she’d studied many species, Thanos insisted she know all the weaknesses that could be exploited. They knew as much as any sentient race, it was the physical structures that were lacking. To have one even able to say his name in an understandable way indicated the presence of linguistic prodigy.

“Well I tell you what, that’s gonna wear real thin, real fast. If I…” Quill trailed off and his face transformed with rage. Gamora felt the same trill of fear she’d had when he was fighting her, the presence of a threat, a focused sort of power. “Hey. Put that away. You son of a… Hey! Listen to me, you big blue bastard. Take those headphones off. That’s mine, those belong in impound. That tape and that player are mine!”

She watched in mute horror and appreciation as he broke free of the safety of the transport column and confronted a much bigger guard over the sanctity of a music player. That was some sort of insanity, she was sure. Although it was impressive, especially when he fought through a stun-rod blast to name the song he was claiming as his.

Maybe it wasn’t lack of forethought that made his tongue so free. Maybe it was knowing he could take that punishment. Gamora could admire that. She’d always wished she’d had her sister’s tolerance and endurance.

Or maybe not, she thought, as Quill drooled into the floor after the third shock.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Elphaba: the name given to the green-skinned Wicked Witch of the West in the book and musical Wicked.
Drop Bear: Australian cryptid described as an unusually large and vicious koala with carnivorous eating habits and fangs.
Ent: the large walking/talking trees from Tolkien's Lord of the Rings.
Ranger Rick: the raccoon park ranger protagonist of a children’s nature magazine that is published by the United States National Wildlife Federation.

Shiny blue suitcase: A reference to the MacGuffin of The Big Empty, which came out in 2003. I assume Darcy has been sharing movies with Peter, because otherwise he wouldn't have seen this.

Ark of the Covenant: the MacGuffin of the first Indiana Jones movie.

Maltese Falcon: the Ultimate MacGuffin, the statue everyone was chasing in the film noir movie of the same name.

Giving Tree: the tree character in the Shel Silverstein children's book of the same name.

Notes:
For clarification in case I wasn't blunt enough, Steve, Darcy, and Bucky are awake because they were having sex. Sandra is still asleep but the link is something Jean listens for and she's a light sleeper from years of working in a boarding school. Jean was able to scoop them into the link because they were awake, and frankly, she's used to pointedly ignoring everyone else's sex lives.

Darcy has very strong issues with anyone who refers to sentient beings by serial number. It's related to her time in Red Room, and although she's irritated by Rocket right now, it's actually going to make her more sympathetic to him later.

In the comics, Groot (and for that matter, all Flora Colossus) are highly intelligent creatures who are almost impossible to understand due to the stiffness of their larynxes. Groot of the Guardians is actually "His Divine Majesty King Groot the 23rd, Monarch of Planet X, custodian of the branch worlds, ruler of all the shades" and he's quite eloquent. Rocket knows that, because he can hear outside of normal ranges, but he and Groot prefer to be underestimated. Gamora is aware of the general idea of Groot being smart, but she doesn't know any specifics. In at least one version of comic canon, Ronan and Thanos wiped out the entire homeworld of the Flora Colossus, so that's where I'm going with Gamora having been taught weaknesses and strengths.

Teaser:

“And you know why they call me this,” Drax said. He knew Moloka Dar did know, but he was also exceptionally stupid, so the chances he would have forgotten were higher than Drax liked. It was safer to check first. He would never learn if Drax didn’t make sure he knew what he'd done wrong.
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

Peter Quill Makes Friends: Or What NOT To Do your First Day In Prison.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Snowecat, minishadowsoul, quadrad, Tsita, SionnachOiChe3, Snowdove30, Shadows_of_Shemai, Beth_Mac, Joey99, Notashamed, ValkyriePhoenix, Selene_Aduial, hhhellcat, tigrislilium, and nemohana.

So, this monstrosity is over 300 pages in a google doc. I had to split it into two for ease of editing, but that means next chapter may require more editing than usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter hated the astringent smell of the sanitizing spray. He also hated the color. It was orange, and it stained his skin. Human beings were not meant to have orange skin. All shades of peach and tan and brown and black, sure, but orange? Nope. He tried to avoid thinking about it by looking at the other newbies. He actually kind of liked the raccoon. He was an ass, but he was funny and smart and he had the raw, self-sufficient streak Peter had seen in most of the less unpleasant Ravagers.

Of course the raccoon’s back made him want to lose his lunch.

He’d seen the scars of mad science before. It was like the ropes of scar tissue that bonded the metal replacement arm to Bucky’s body. Ugly, permanent, and a trophy of surviving something awful. He made a note to avoid touching unless he had to, because for one, that seemed like a good way to lose a finger, and two, he didn’t feel like being that much of a dick.

He was less sure what to do about Groot. He couldn’t understand him the way the raccoon could, and his cheerful, innocent approach to violence was disturbing. He did seem to be part and parcel with Ranger Rick, though, so there was that. If Peter wanted to befriend him, he’d have to take Groot too. Which, you know, there could be worse.

The green mystery woman was another matter. Peter was interested, sure. It wasn’t sexual though. She was beautiful, even hosed down with orange goo and in a prisoner’s uniform, but it was the layer of brittle strength over deep pain that was catching his eye. She was strong, he didn’t doubt that if she went toe to toe with Darcy, but she was hiding something more than wanting to sell his orb. It made him want to hug her, punch the person who hurt her, and take her to a gun range for therapeutic target destruction, all at the same time. The feeling only got worse as the other prisoners started jeering.

“You first! You first!”

“Murderer!”
“Coming for you first, Gamora!”

“You’re dead!”

“You’re scum! You’re scum!”

Peter looked at the raccoon, hoping to get filled in. Fortunately, his silent message worked. Or the dude really liked the sound of his own voice, which, if Peter were a raccoon that could talk, he’d probably be showing it off too.

“It’s like I said, she’s got a rep. A lot of prisoners here have lost their families to Ronan and his goons. She’ll last a day... *tops.*” Ordinarily that sort of statement would make Peter itch for his betting book. Instead it made his eyes soften in compassion as Gamora’s back stiffened.

“Murderer!” screamed another inmate. Peter flinched as flecks of spit went flying.

“The guards will protect her, right?” he asked.

“They? They’re here to stop us from getting *out,*” said the furball with a snort that made Peter revise his desire to befriend the guy. “They don’t care what we do to each other *inside.*”

“Whatever nightmares the future holds,” Gamora said calmly, “are dreams compared to what’s behind me.”

Peter realized where he’d seen that mix of strong and vulnerable before. It was different, newer and less healed, but it was almost the same as Darcy’s daughter Natasha. There was history there that he didn’t know much of, but he knew it involved a bad, captive childhood, and was painful enough that Natasha had spent years trying and failing to heal on her own.

He was so lost in thought, that he almost didn’t see the inmate who decided to threaten him with jelly, of all the things. Fortunately, his new frenemies had. Groot lifted the guy up in the air by his nostrils.

“Let’s make something clear,” said the raccoon, almost moving back into potential ally status. “This one here is our bounty! You wanna get to him, you go through us! Or, more accurately, *we* go through you.”

“I’m with them,” Peter said, pointing.

<^> Rocket wasn’t an idiot. He could see what was going on with the humie. The poor bastard felt bad for Gamora and he let it cause him problems. Probably the same suicidal impulse that got him in trouble with the worst gang of Ravagers out there, but that was neither here nor there.

“Look,” he told the humie as they settled into their bunk. “We’re in this for the payday offered on you. Forty thousand units to deliver you, alive and reasonably intact, to one Yondu Udonta. You keep your head down, don’t get killed, we’ll keep you safe and sound till we bust out and take you in.”

“You know, offering to sell me isn’t maybe the best tack to take here,” the man replied skeptically. “There’s a little give and take in this, you know?”

“You give me one good reason not to *take* off a finger,” Rocket said bluntly. “It said alive on the bounty, reasonably intact is my professional pride talkin’. Shut up and stay alive, and trust us to get
you outta here.”

“Fair enough, Ranger Rick,” the human said, sticking a paw out.

“It’s Rocket,” Rocket clarified. “Call me that or we got problems.”

“Fine, whatever,” the human said, pulling back his hand. “You gonna let me get some sleep, Rocket?”

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” Rocket agreed, curling up near Groot. He watched the human settle in, restlessly shifting his fur.

You miss Terra, Groot said.

“No, I’ve never even been there,” Rocket insisted. “I was born on Half-world. You know that.”

You still miss it. You can miss things you never got to see, Groot replied. You miss the idea he represents.

“The humie don’t represent squat except a payday,” Rocket told his only friend.

He wasn’t identified as human in the file, Groot pointed out. You know what he is because you went looking for info on Terra.

“So?” Rocket asked. “Go to sleep, Bark-Brain. You get loopy when you’re tired.”

He didn’t miss Terra. He didn’t think of what life would be like if he’d been born there, instead of in a lab. He didn’t want to go to the home he’d never gotten to see.

He didn’t.

Did he?

<^>

Drax snorted to himself as Thanos’s daughter walked through the prison. He could not imagine a better chance to strike back a blow at the one who slaughtered his family. The green murderer would die tonight.

In the dim light of the prison’s night-cycle, he stalked his prey. He growled when he discovered that someone else dared to try to kill her first. Gamora was HIS prize, not any of these weak cowards, ones who thought to steal the death that was rightfully his.

“Gamora, consider this a death sentence for your crimes against the galaxy,” said Moloka Dar, the sniveling wretch. Drax bellowed his rage.

“You dare?” They looked at him. He saw fear in them. That was wise. “You know who I am, yes?”


“And you know why they call me this,” Drax said. He knew Moloka Dar did know, but he was also exceptionally stupid, so the chances he would have forgotten were higher than Drax liked. It was safer to check first. He would never learn if Drax didn’t make sure he knew what he’d done wrong.

“You slayed dozens of Ronan’s minions,” Moloka Dar replied, shrinking back from Drax. That was
unnecessary, Drax did not mean to kill him. Tonight’s kill was someone much fouler. Of course, it would be best to make sure the message stuck.

“Ronan murdered my wife, Ovette, and my daughter, Camaria. He slaughtered them where they stood. And he laughed!” Drax was shaking slightly as the fury built in him. He could still feel the heat of the fires and the limp form of his beloved Ovette, always so strong and unyielding in life, limp and giving in death, and the cold, still body of Camaria, who had always been moving, running, jumping, fighting. His family, dead in front of him and their killer laughing. “Her life is not yours to take. He killed my family, I shall kill one of his in return.”

“Of course, Drax,” Moloka Dar said, repentant of his indiscretion. He handed Drax a knife. “Here, I…”

As Moloka Dar was distracted, the daughter of Thanos kicked his companions, taking their weapons. If Drax did not intend to kill her, he might have laughed, as the sight of a trained killer taking on two petty thugs was quite amusing. As it was, he only appreciated the skill she showed, because it meant that she would provide a challenge when he took her life.

“I’m no family to Ronan or Thanos,” Gamora insisted. She stepped back and dropped her weapons. Drax frowned. It would not be as satisfying to kill her if she would not fight. “I’m your only hope at stopping him.”

Drax grabbed her neck, forcing her to look in his eyes. He did not care for liars.

“Woman, your words mean nothing to me!” he hissed into her face. Her body remained relaxed, and her face impassive. If she was scared of him at all, it did not show. Drax could almost respect that. Almost did not mean did, however.

“Hey!” interrupted the pale man who had arrived with Gamora. The one claimed by the small vermin and the plant. “Hey, hey, hey! Hey!”

Drax looked at him, silently asking him to make things quick. If he thought that being attacked by this woman earned him any right to her death when he still lived and Drax’s family were dead, he would be swiftly informed otherwise.

“You know, if killing Ronan is truly your sole purpose, I don’t think this is the best way to go about it,” he said. Drax tilted his head. That was not what he expected.

“Are you not the man this wench attempted to kill?”

“Well, I mean, she’s hardly the first woman to try and do that to me,” said the man with a shrug. Drax did not ask for clarification, but the man must have felt it necessary, as he pulled up his shirt to reveal a scar. “Look, this is from a smoking-hot Rajak girl. Stabbed me with a fork. Didn’t like me skipping out on her at sunrise.”

The man pointed to another scar, one on his neck.

“I got, right here, a Kree girl tried to rip out my thorax. She caught me with this skinny little A’askavarian who worked in Nova Records. I was trying to get information. You ever see an A’askavarian? They have tentacles and needles for teeth. If you think I’m seriously interested in that, then…” Drax narrowed his eyes in contempt. Why would any man lay with an A’askavarian if he truly did not think said woman attractive? “You don’t care. But here’s the point. She betrayed Ronan, he’s coming back for her. And when he does, that’s when you…”

He drew his finger across his throat. It was obviously a symbolic gesture, perhaps a part of the
man’s native language. There were many languages that required somatic elements, gestures of the hands. None of them translated well, and Drax wished to know what was really meant.

“Why would I put my finger on his throat?” he asked.

“What?” said the man, confused. Perhaps he was not that intelligent. “Oh, this is a symbol. This is a symbol for you, slicing Ronan’s throat.”

Drax considered that, imagining the kill. It was close, but not quite right. “I would not slice his throat, I would cut his head clean off.”

“It’s a general expression for you killing somebody,” the man insisted. He turned to Moloka Dar and repeated the gesture. “You’ve heard of this. You’ve seen this, right? You know what that is.”

“Yeah,” Moloka Dar agreed. The skinny thing was clearly afraid of someone as insane or as skilled so as to not care what Drax had done. “Yeah.”

“Everyone knows,” said the newcomer.

“No,” Moloka Dar said quickly as Drax looked at him in question. He did tend to change his story to fit whoever was most dangerous. He didn't need to fear Drax. Drax simply wanted to know how common that somatic word was. “No, no.”

“Anyhow,” the man who was defending Gamora said, moving the conversation along. “What I’m saying is, you want to keep her alive. Don’t do his work for him.”

Drax considered this. He could see the wisdom in keeping a small prize alive as bait for the bigger one. He also didn’t feel as right about killing someone who had sought to harm Ronan as he had been. He decided to try this new way of hunting his revenge and nodded, releasing Gamora’s neck.

“I like your knife,” he told Moloka Dar. “I’m keeping it.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Frenemy: someone who is both friend and enemy. (Fun Fact: Winston Churchill is credited with first coining this term.)
Humie: short for human, Rocket-specific slang.
Loopy: silly or stupid, associated with being high on drugs or exhaustion.
Somatic: a movement or gesture. ASL is an entirely somatic language.

Notes:
My read of Peter and Gamora is that it doesn’t start as a sexual spark, it starts as Peter feeling genuinely protective of her because their scars line up in strange ways. It goes that direction eventually, but for now, Peter wouldn’t try anything, he sees her as having a compromised ability to consent and Darcy and Jillian have rammed respect into his skull.

(Slight spoiler for Guardians 2)
Yondu Udonta’s Ravager clan is seen as the worst because Yondu broke one of the rules of the Ravager Code and was exiled. Rocket knows that, but he doesn’t know
Yondu raised Peter and acts like his dad.

Groot has known Rocket basically his whole life, from where Rocket was born and modified on the planet Half-World. He knows Rocket has a certain level of push-pull with Earth, and since he cares less about money, he'd be happy to give up Peter's bounty to help Rocket get closure on that. Rocket, however, may never have been to Terra but he still lives in that river in Egypt.

Groot is a plant-based life-form and I saw no sunlamps in that prison. I assume he needs to conserve his energy until he can feed on solar rays, and when he doesn't rest and is running near empty, he would have side effects. Rocket parses that as tired, not as starving, but it's very much the same. Also, I am 100% pissed off at Nova Corps for their treatment of Groot because he could die on a prison station with no sunlight.

Drax in my work is not unintelligent, he's just very literal due more to language barriers than cultural ones. His people are less unable to grasp the idea of metaphor and more disinclined to use translation devices, so everything parses through Galactic Common as a second language and it leaves him missing certain ideas.

Teaser:

“This sounds like what happens sometimes with genius engineers. All the brains none of the smarts.”
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

Escaping a prison: easy.
Retrieving their stuff: mostly easy.
Refraining from killing each other?
Now that's hard.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To quadrad, ValkyriePhoenix, Notashamed, Tsita, Snowecat, SionnachOiche3, Jade01, Snowdove30, Selene_Aduial, Joey99, Shadows_of_Shemai, hhhellcat, and Beth_Mac.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter fought down an urge to grab Gamora’s arm. She wouldn’t like it and it would probably get him killed. He really did try to avoid doing death inducing things more than he had to, he just wound up in them. “Listen! I could care less whether you live or die,” he lied. Sometimes cynicism was the best road.

“Then why stop the big guy?” she asked.

“Simple,” he replied, leaning hard into the image she already had of him. He’d learned well from is Terran head-mates how to use expectations to your own advantage. “You know where to sell my orb.”

“How are we gonna sell it when we and it are still here?” she asked reasonably.

“Well,” Peter said with a grin and gesturing where he knew the overprotective raccoon was standing. “My friend Rocket here has escaped twenty-two prisons.”

“Oh, we’re getting out,” Rocket said grimly. “And then we’re headed straight to Yondu to retrieve your bounty.”

“How much was your buyer willing to pay you for my orb?” Peter asked Gamora. The Broker had been willing to pay at least four times what Yondu could have justified for Peter.

“Four billion units,” Gamora answered, and Peter felt his heart stop a bit. The Broker had been planning to royally screw the Ravagers on that deal.

“Holy shit,” he said, trying to process that. He could have gotten free of it for a year just on the Ravager cut if they’d been getting paid that.

“That orb is my opportunity to get away from Thanos and Ronan. If you free us,” she said to Rocket,
“I’ll lead you to the buyer directly and I’ll split the profit between the three of us.”

“I am Groot,” insisted the tree.

“Four of us,” Rocket translated. Peter got the feeling he was seeing half a conversation as the two argued. “Asleep for the danger, awake for the money, as per frickin’ usual.”

The next day, the four of them stuck close together. Peter waited for Rocket to share his brilliant plan, and was rewarded for his patience during lunch.

“If we’re gonna get out of here, we’re gonna need to get into that watchtower,” Rocket said, carefully not pointing. Peter made a mental note. “And to do that I’m gonna need a few things. The guards wear security bands to control their ins and outs. I need one.”

“Leave it to me,” Gamora said seriously.

“That dude, there,” Rocket said, this time pointing. “I need his prosthetic leg.”

“No, I really heard they find you attractive,” Rocket said with a casual shrug. “So, maybe there was a part there that was important.

“If we’re gonna get out of here, we’re gonna need to get into that watchtower,” Rocket said, carefully not pointing. Peter made a mental note. “And to do that I’m gonna need a few things. The guards wear security bands to control their ins and outs. I need one.”

“Leave it to me,” Gamora said seriously.

“That dude, there,” Rocket said, this time pointing. “I need his prosthetic leg.”

“His leg?” Peter asked. It seemed… wrong.

“Yeah,” Rocket confirmed. “God knows I don’t need the rest of him. Look at him, he’s useless.”

“Alright,” Peter said, dragging it out. He wasn’t sure he liked this plan, but he’d never engineered a break-out, so maybe there was a part there that was important.

“And finally, on the wall back there is a black panel. Blinky yellow light. Do you see it?” Rocket asked. Peter looked.

“Yeah.”

“There’s a quarnyx battery behind it. Purplish box, green wires. To get into that watchtower, I definitely need it.”

“How are we supposed to do that?” asked Gamora, looking at the high box on the wall of the guard tower.

“Well, supposably, these bald-bodies find you attractive,” Rocket said with a casual shrug. “So, maybe you can work out some sort of trade.”

“You must be joking,” Gamora said dryly.

“No, I really heard they find you attractive,” said Rocket. Peter thought he recognised this problem from an argument between Jane and Jillian that spilled over into the mind-space.

“She means you can’t be serious that she should trade on her looks,” Peter told the raccoon. “It’s something she’d never do, because often times those bald-bodies don’t respect women who do it and she’s got the look of a woman who requires respect to live. Please forgive him,” he asked Gamora. “This sounds like what happens sometimes with genius engineers. All the brains none of the smarts.”

“Look, it’s twenty feet up in the air, and it’s in the middle of the most heavily-guarded part of the prison. It’s impossible to get up there without being seen,” Gamora said, dismissing Peter, but at least she didn’t look likely to murder Rocket.

“I got one plan, and that plan requires a frickin’ quarnyx battery, so figure it out! Can I get back to it? Thanks,” Rocket said harshly. “Now, this is important; once the battery is removed, everything
is gonna slam into emergency mode. So once we have it, we gotta move quickly. You definitely need to get that last."

The alarms came on and Peter looked over to see Groot waving the battery.

“Or we could just get it first and improvise,” Rocket sighed.

“I’ll get the armband,” Gamora volunteered.

“Leg,” Peter claimed quickly. Maybe he could tap Bucky to negotiate for the leg, one prosthesis-user to another? It certainly seemed likely he’d end up using the swap.

<^>

Bucky was winning at a game of poker between Margaret, Jake, Jillian and himself, when Sandra tapped his shoulder.

“I think I’ll need you. I’m not sure… but I think it’s soon.”

“What?” he asked, glancing at Jean. He didn’t want to undermine Sandra, but it was hard not to ask the telepath what was happening.

“I think Sandra may be more than just a Swapper,” Jean said without him asking. “In any case, let’s get ready.”

Bucky nodded and folded his hand, moving to sit on the sofa with his arm propped up above the armrest with a pillow. They learned not to let him go totally slack during a shared swap the hard way. Sandra curled her legs under her in the meditation pose Natasha had taught her on the sofa beside him. She took a deep, shaky breath and blew it out through her mouth. Bucky closed his eyes and let his mind drift so Jean could scoop it up and put it in the mind-space.

Light was different in the mind-space. They could generate everything in here except realistic light. The odd ambient light was fine, though, it just messed with depth perception and he wasn’t sniping here. He just had to remind himself of that as Sandra called up and opened a door for Peter to fall through.

“Okay, what’s up?” Bucky asked.

“Um… a raccoon named Rocket is breaking me out of prison and needs a guy’s prosthetic leg. Also, the station is in emergency mode because a tree named Groot stole a battery.”

“Fair enough,” Bucky sighed and moved for the door. “See you in a bit, Peter.”

“Wait,” Peter called. “One more thing, there’s a big grey guy with, like, magenta tattoos, name of Drax. I promised he could come with us because he wants to kill Gamora’s old boss and she’s his bait. Also, he has no problems with murdering me if I don’t… so. There’s that. Gamora’s the one who tried to steal the orb, to betray that old boss, and we’re all basically on the same side. Have fun!”

“Peter, you’re insane,” Bucky sighed and stepped into the swap. He caught up with the guy who had the leg they needed and slipped in the cell beside him.

“Who are you and what do you want?” asked the guy.

“I’ve been told I need your leg to break out of prison. What’s the leg worth to you?”
“You need my what?”

“Leg. Prosthetic. Now. What would a new, better one, cost you?”

“Are you kidding? This one cost me twenty thousand units.”

“How’s thirty thousand units sound?” Bucky asked.

“Forty,” tried the prisoner.

“Thirty, and I give you a good word on an experimental nerve welding trial that a friend is running.” The guy nodded and began unstrapping the crude replacement leg. Bucky pulled up the data account the swapping team used for their share of the Ravager hauls on the screen on the wall. Fortunately it had all the info for a transfer to that inmate right there. “You want Karmen-Kan, she’s a Krylorian doctor on Xandar. Good woman, very smart, has an adorable kid. Get in good with her and you’ll not only get a new leg that works better, but you’ll also have the friendship of Rhomann Dey. He’s in Nova Corps.”

“Thanks, man,” the guy said, and handed him the leg. “Good luck!”

“Drop the leg!” ordered a guard as Bucky left. “Drop the leg and move back to your cell!”

“Sorry ‘bout this,” he sighed, and hit the guy in the face with the leg and snagged his guns. It wasn’t too hard to find the center of the fighting, and even with leg, not too hard to clear out a few floating robot sentries.

“Rocket!” shouted someone, and Bucky caught a glimpse of green. Ah, must be Gamora.

“Move to the watchtower!” shouted a raccoon, presumably Rocket. Bucky decided to do as the man said, but his back began to itch with the feeling of a target and he let go of the tower wall. As he hit the ground, a loud crunching sound told him the robot was down. He rolled and flipped upright to salute the shirtless tattooed man who’d saved his bacon.

“You! Man who has lain with an A’askavarian!” Drax shouted at him.

“Firstly, it was one time,” Bucky said, counting on his fingers, “and secondly, shame me for sex again and I will put a gun up your ass and pull the trigger. Let’s go.”

In the tower, Groot handily dispatched the guard. Drax and Gamora started a bit of a pissing match and Bucky stepped in to solve it, flashing back to shades of Howlies.

“Look, Gamora. We promised him he could stay by your side until he kills your old boss. Not only is that something you want, it was a promise and I always keep my promises.”

"Oh really?” she said, shooting him a look. Bucky could have slapped himself, obviously Peter wasn't batting a thousand on promises.

"Well, when they’re to muscle-bound whack-jobs who will try kill me if I don’t, yes!” Bucky sighed and tossed the leg to Rocket. “Here you go.”

“Oh, I was just kidding about the leg,” Rocket said, setting the leg down. He gestured to the other technology in front of him. “I just need these two things.”

“What?” Bucky asked, irritated he’d been called in over a joke. Swaps were serious business! If he’d been tapped, it meant Peter had been at risk. Risk that never should have been.
“No, I…” Rocket laughed. “I thought it’d be funny. Was it funny? No, wait, what did he look like hopping around?”

Bucky growled and dropped back on the link.

“That raccoon is an unrepentant asshole who lied about needing the leg,” he told Peter. “Take over before I shoot him.”

<^>

Rocket wiped his eyes and got to work, trying to ignore the bickering behind him. When Quill called Drax a thesaurus, Rocket snorted and waited for the threats and misunderstandings. It would be amusing, like a holo-drama on in the background, if they weren’t so loud.

“His people are completely literal,” Rocket warned. “Metaphors are gonna go over his head.”

“Nothing goes over my head,” Drax declared. “My reflexes are too fast. I would catch it.

“I’m gonna die surrounded by the biggest idiots in the galaxy,” Gamora groaned. Rocket could sympathise.

“Those are some big guns,” said Quill. A moment later the watchtower window made a sick crack-thud sound and Rocket snapped another wire into place.

“Rodent, we are ready for your plan,” Gamora said, her voice betraying a tiny waver of fear. It almost made him like her more. Almost. He still didn't like being called a rodent

“Hold on!” Rocket instructed.

“I recognize this animal,” Drax said. “We’d roast them over a flame pit as children. Their flesh was quite delicious.”

“Not,” Rocket grunted, “helping!

The window made another whap-crack sound and Rocket tried to ignore the electric crackle of risk under his fur. He was so close, and then, the last circuit was complete and the gravity was selectively disengaged.

“You turned off the artificial gravity, everywhere but in here,” Gamora said, stating the obvious, but in an admiring way. Rocket preened a bit.

“I told you I had a plan.” He detached the watchtower from its base, then ordered the security droids to attack to the base of it. They couldn’t get in that way, but he could use their jets to fly the watchtower out of the prison.

“That was a pretty good plan,” Quill admitted as Rocket landed them in the impound. “Yeah! There it is. Get my ship. It’s the Milano, the orange and blue one over in the corner.”

“They crumpled my pants up into a ball,” Rocket noted. He glanced at the others and their perfectly sorted things. “That’s rude! They folded yours.”

His indignation washed in and over him, some kind of primitive biological soup of rage and hunger and the ache under his nails where he was trying not to claw something to little blood-soaked bits. He snorted and started changing. He would not be the monster they tried to make him on Half-world. He would never be the vermin that other people saw. He refused to be the barely-controlled
Subject 89P13 that got treated as a less than sentient animal by Nova Corps.

He was Rocket.

His focus was broken by a similar whiff of outrage coming from Quill, right before he shoved a bag at Gamora and ran off.

“Just keep the Milano close by. Go. Go!” he shouted. Rocket shrugged and waved for Groot to follow him to the ship that had been pointed out earlier. Gamora took the captain’s chair and Rocket slipped into the gunner’s seat, and the two ran through the pre-flight checks. Groot spent his time messing with the nav system and occasionally making comments about the ship’s surprisingly good condition, considering it was an older model M-Ship with patches on it’s patches.

“Well, how’s he gonna get to us?” Rocket asked, as the new, not being shot at, position made a flaw in this plan suddenly all too clear.

“He declined to share that information with me,” Gamora said dryly. She had that hard-eyed look going, the one that made his memories flick between scientists and fellow subjects. Her scent was thick with stress, though, and it almost made him feel… maybe a little worried. Sort of a vestigial pack-sense or some crap. He made a mental note to ask Groot about it later. The tree was good at picking that sort of thing apart. In the mean time, he hated waiting.

“Well, screw this, then! I ain’t waiting around for some humie with a death wish. You got the orb, right?”

“Yes,” Gamora said, looking in the bag. “Shit. It’s not in there.”

“If we don’t leave now, we will be blown to bits,” Rocket told her.

“No! We’re not leaving without the orb,” she insisted.

“Behold,” Drax said and pointed out the window. Quill was rocketing towards them on jet-boots, a fancy mask over his face. He was moving fast enough to avoid being out there long enough for the vacuum to boil his blood, and Rocket slapped the controls.

“Crazy humie,” he muttered.

“This one shows spirit. He shall make a keen ally in the battle against Ronan,” Drax declared.

“Companion, what were you retrieving?”

“This,” Quill said and held up his music device from when they were first processed into the Kyln.

“You’re an imbecile,” Drax told him. Rocket had to agree.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Units: a measure of currency.
Bald-bodies: Rocket-speak for humanoids.
Saved his bacon: rescued him.
A’askavariian: the species of really ugly alien that Peter mentioned having had sex with.
Notes:
Previously I used the term "credit" for currency, as a slang thing. Units are a more precise term. Much like the difference between "money" and "dollars" (or pounds, pesos, francs, etc.) So someone might say "gimme all your credit" but not "that costs five credit" but someone might say "fat stacks of units" OR "fat stacks of credit"

When Groot talks (aside from "I am Groot") outside of a Rocket or Groot PoV, it will either be ignored entirely or translated as "I am Groot" with various stress marks.

Peter's not fully educated on prosthetic advocacy or the human rights implications of treating prosthetics as separate from their users, but he's spent enough time near Bucky to pick up a gut instinct that Rocket is being a jerk about it.

Rocket is indeed an asshole and I won't try to make him not an asshole, but I honestly never thought that his offhand suggestion that Gamora prostitute herself for the battery was the same level of gross it would be from someone who lives in a humanoid society. He's an outsider and it shows here. He's also (and this is what Peter picks up on) a genius and as such tends towards a level of literal thinking where he states facts, and assumes others are either stating facts or lying. It tends to get people in trouble, hence Peter stepping in.

Sandra is at the age where most mutants start fully expressing their gifts. She's not fully resolved into her power, hence Jean being vague, but it's some sort of precognitive ability.

Bucky is a friendly guy, who likes chatting to people no matter what else is going on. On a previous swap, he was being booked by Rhomann Dey and Dey's family came in for some reason, so Bucky struck up a friendship. Especially since Karmen-Kan is a doctor who works in a field he's invested in. It's part of why Dey is so friendly to Peter when Peter doesn't act at all friendly back. Dey knows his wife likes Peter, he doesn't know his wife really is friends with Bucky.

Bucky doesn't take slut-shaming well, and the A’askavariian woman was actually very nice. Fortunately, his bluntness works well with Drax's literal thinking and Drax won't cross that line again.

Rocket has issues, but Rocket also has very understandable reservations about working with people who make low-key death threats to him. Drax is Not Helping here and it's setting Rocket up for a meltdown the second he can relax an inch. The way his property was treated by the guards is also Not Helping, hence his need to fight down the meltdown until a later time. Because his brain is a trigger warning in and of itself, Rocket's going to put it off until it blows up.

Gamora's history places her in between the paradigms that Rocket is used to. She's been horrifically abused, hence him recognizing some of her scars as being like the captives on Half-world where he was created. However, she was also trained to horrifically abuse others, and she uses that as a shield from her own traumas, which he identifies as a trait of the scientists who ran the experiments.

The vacuum of space can be survived, just not for very long. I'd assume Peter's mask extends that time but doesn't keep him alive as well as a full suit or the end of Guardians 2 would have been very different.
Teaser:

Yondu made a professional policy of distrusting anything too clean, it meant someone, somewhere, was hiding something.
Peter sighed as he double checked their course away from the Kyln. Somehow, he’d managed to turn a trip to get an easy pay day and buy some rest for Sandra turned into two assaults, an arrest, and a prison break. He was not happy about this. He was even less happy with the nut-jobs on his ship at the moment.

“Woah, woah, woah!” he exclaimed, reaching for Rocket’s tiny little hands. “Yo, Ranger Rick! What are you doing? You can’t take apart my ship without asking me! See, what is this?”

“Don’t touch that, it’s a bomb,” said the raccoon. Peter felt his face blanch in stress and fear.

“A bomb?” he asked, hoping he’d misheard somehow, and also that nobody, especially Gamora, could hear the high, tight sound under his words. Panic was a bitch and a half on any kind of tough guy rep. Rocket confirmed that, yes, it was a bomb, and Peter had to fight not to tear at his hair.

“And you were just going to leave it lying around?”

“Well, I was gonna put it in a box,” Rocket offered. Peter rolled his eyes.

“What’s a box gonna do?” he asked nobody in particular, partly because he knew his own ideas weren’t any more sensible, aside from maybe don’t turn the ship we’re on into bombs. Which shouldn’t need to be suggested, it should be the default norm. Of course, said a voice in his head that sounded like Yondu, since when have default norms ever survived first contact with Peter Jason Quill or his many, many issues?

He was readying to forgive Rocket when he saw the wrapping paper in the raccoon’s paws.

“How about this one?” he suggested.

“No!” Peter yelped, moving to take his last private, special piece of his mother from the little scavenger. “Woah! Hey, hey! Leave it alone!”

“Why? What is it?” Rocket asked. Part of Peter knew he was being a dick, but he didn’t care as he
checked the paper for rips from Rocket's claws.

“It’s not for discussion and not your business.”

“Touchy,” Rocket said, putting his hands up in a defensive way. Peter was happy to agree to let that subject drop, and pointed to something else, that looked suspiciously like a flight impeller grafted onto a crossbow.

“What is that?”

“That’s for if things get really hardcore,” Rocket said. “Or if you wanna blow up moons.”

“No one’s blowing up moons,” Gamora said firmly.

“You just wanna suck the joy out of everything,” Rocket complained. Peter gave him a sympathetic look. He felt the same when Darcy or Bucky vetoed one of his plans. So annoying, yet probably a good idea.

“So, listen,” he said to Gamora, guiding her away from where Rocket was glaring daggers at her, “I’m gonna need your buyer’s coordinates.”

“We’re heading in the right direction, for now,” she said, picking up the orb.

“If we’re gonna work together, you might want to try trusting me a little bit,” he said. He didn’t like all this cloak and dagger nonsense. It felt wrong to him, somehow, and the finely honed gut instinct that let him avoid two of every three swap situations was nudging him.

“And how much do you trust me?” she asked in return. Touche, he admitted in his own mind. He reached out and took the orb from her, and held it up for illustration.

“I’d trust you a lot more if you told me what this was. Because I’m guessing it’s some kind of weapon.”

“I don’t know what it is,” she said, and he believed her. He set the orb down to try to talk to her, when Drax picked it up.

“If it’s a weapon, we should use it against Ronan.”

“Put it down, you fool!” Gamora cried, and Peter could see the panic in her face. She might not know what it was, but she did know it was dangerous. “You’ll destroy us all.”

The two of them broke out fighting, and Peter said a silent apology to Yondu, because dear Lord, this was like having teenagers on board.

“Hey! Nobody is killing anybody on my ship!” he said, forcing his way between them. He looked at both of them carefully until they calmed down a bit. “We’re stuck together until we get the money.”

“I have no interest in money,” Drax said and stormed off.

“Great,” Peter said, looking at Gamora and Rocket. “That means more money for the three of us.”

Groot made a noise indicating he counted too, and Peter nodded. “For the four of us. Sorry. You’re quiet... I like it, but it’s easy to miss you. Partners?”

“We have an agreement,” Gamora said sharply, “but I would never be partners with the likes of you. I’ll tell the buyer we’re on our way. And Quill, your ship is filthy.”
“Oh, she has no idea,” Peter snorted as she walked away. Rocket looked at him questioningly. “If I had a black light, the place would look like a Jackson Pollock painting.”

“You got issues, Quill,” Rocket said.

“Well, you aren’t wrong,” Peter agreed. Yondu and Darcy and Jean and Lillian and Bucky had all said the same, although with less of the sarcastic sneer Rocket used. Steve had oddly never said anything like that, although he did this strange sigh-and-frown thing that made Peter’s guts clench up. He thought of it as Captain America’s Secret Super Power, or else as the Patented Captain America Disappointed Look. Somehow that hurt worse than anything. Well, anything other than the pouty face Sandra made when he didn’t take care of himself.

On that note, he went to the galley to make lunch.

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Yondu scanned the Broker’s shop carefully, much like a man hunting a dangerous species of megafauna. There didn’t seem to be any danger, but that never stopped danger from being there. Especially when everything was so shiny and clean. Yondu made a professional policy of distrusting anything too clean, it meant someone somewhere was hiding something.

“Do ya got any other cute little buggers like this one?” he asked the Broker, pointing to a shimmering crystal and sapphire frog. It was cute, but he also knew it was far too expensive for a Ravager like him to buy. Especially an exiled one, and he figured the Broker knew that. However, he’d decided in favor of the Terran Darcy’s crazy negotiation tactics, and Kraglin picked up the role of ‘only sane person in the room’ flawlessly, so it worked out. “I like to stick ’em all in a row on my control console.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking or not,” said the Broker, clearly uncomfortable. Good. That’s where Yondu wanted him. He needed two things from this, to find out if Peter had been here, and to figure out where he’d be if not here. Make that three, actually. He also needed to know what damn fool thing they’d been sent after and how much of a threat it was.

“He’s being fully serious,” Kraglin said calmly.

“In that case,” the man said, eager for a commision, “I can show you…”

Yondu laughed. “Sure, sure. But first, you gonna tell me when Peter Quill last visited.”

“He was in here just yesterday,” the Broker said. “He tried to sell me the Orb, but certain… parties being mentioned made me reconsider my offer. I think he was arrested after that.”

“Uh huh,” Yondu said, unimpressed. This Orb was getting his family in too deep for comfort. He wanted some real answers, and he trusted Quill could get out of whatever mess he was in. Well, he trusted Quill’s brain-partners to get him out of it. He just had to figure out where Peter would go next. “So now you gonna tell me what this orb is, and why everybody cares so damn much about it. And then you gonna tell me who out there might wanna buy it.”

“Sir,” the Broker said, pained. “The high-end community is a…”

Yondu interrupted him with a stream of gibberish.

“The high-end community is a…”

Yondu continued to talk gibberish over the Broker as he struggled to say some excuse or other.
Finally, he snapped. “I cannot possibly betray the confidentiality of my buyers!”

Yondu hummed, and popped the clasp on his arrow’s holster. Wetting his lips, he blew the cadence to bring the yaka to life and guide it toward the Broker, stopping a hair from the man’s eye. He didn’t actually intend to kill the man, but sometimes a show of what could happen loosened up tongues.

“Now,” he asked calmly. “Who again is this buyer of yours?”

Rocket liked the Milano, it had a nice handling system, and he disliked dealing with too many people, so he spent a lot of time up in the cockpit. When he saw the proximity alerts, he called back. “Heads up! We’re inbound.”

“Woah.” Quill’s jaw was slack, he looked like an idiot, but just once, Rocket couldn’t blame him. Their destination looked like a giant floating head that glowed. It was pretty astounding.

“What is it?” Drax asked.

“It’s called Knowhere,” Gamora said. Rocket snorted at her superior tone as she explained it to them. Severed head, ancient being, blah blah blah. “Be wary headed in, Rodent. There are no regulations whatsoever here.”

“Lady. I think you misunderstand my line of business,” he snorted as he cut off a mining rig with half a breath of space between them. “Regulations are not something I worry about. What’s with all the mining junk? These ships can barely fly. GET A HUSTLE ON, LOSERS!”

“Hundreds of years ago, the Tivan Group sent workers to mine the organic matter within the skull,” she explained.

Oh well, might as well get a history lesson while they were stuck in boring, slow traffic. Ohh, wait, there was a spot to park at. Rocket only sort of paid attention to her continuing speech as he set them down and triggered the auto locks to come back on once they left the ship. Wouldn’t do to have the getaway ship stolen.

“It’s dangerous and illegal work, suitable only for outlaws.”

“Well, I come from a planet of outlaws,” Quill bragged. “Billy the Kid. Bonnie and Clyde... John Stamos.”

“It sounds like a place which I would like to visit,” Drax said. Rocket had to stifle a snort. He’d also come from Terra, and he’d done his research. There wasn’t anything there he wanted.

You should talk to him about Terra, Groot said. Rocket turned to tell his friend to stop meddling in Rocket’s head-problems, when a pack of tiny fuckers swarmed past.

“Watch your wallets,” Quill warned.

“Can you spare any units?” asked the kid.

“Get outta here,” Rocket told it. This wasn’t a safe sort of group to go bugging. Best that kids learned it from Rocket baring some teeth than some bruiser slicing them open.

Be gentle with them. They’re just saplings, Groot scolded. A girl walked up to Groot, and the
big softy grew a flower in his hand for her. Rocket snorted and rolled his eyes. For you, Groot said to the girl as he plucked the flower from his palm to give to her.

“It’s kinda creepy to go around giving bits off you to children, you know that right?” Rocket asked his friend as they walked.

If you’re going to be in a mood, I don’t have to listen, Groot said amicably. Sometimes it rankled how unflappable his best friend was. Instead of dwell, he moved up to Gamora as she headed them towards a bar.

“Your buyer’s in there?”

“We are to wait here for his representative,” she said, and Rocket almost felt bad for her. That was a rookie mistake, never let the buyer set the place, or make you wait. A bouncer threw out a patron and Drax scoffed.

“This is no respectable establishment. What do you expect us to do while we wait?”

“Drax, buddy, let me teach you about the marvels of modern entertainment,” Rocket said with a feral grin. “Have you ever heard of Orloni fighting?”

The drinks were good, not too watered down, and the gambling was actually pretty good, none of the Orloni had been messed with to throw the results. Drax had a good eye for the survivors, and after a few rounds, Rocket just started doubling down on whichever one Drax bet on. The big guy didn’t seem to notice, too caught up in his winnings.

“My Orloni has won, as I win at all things!” Drax crowed. “Now, let’s put more of this liquid into our bodies!”

“That’s the first thing you said that wasn’t bat-shit crazy!” Rocket said, genuinely proud of the homicidal nutbag. “Barkeep, another round!”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Black light: a type of filtered light that causes bodily fluid contaminants (like blood and semen) to glow under it.
Jackson Pollock: a painter known for his wild, splattered art style, and also for his rather adventurous sex life.
Galley: the kitchen of a ship.
Megafauna: large animals
Yaka: the material of Yondu's flying arrow.
Orloni: the small, rat-like aliens we see in the bar's animal betting arena.

Notes:
Peter knows how to do the people thing... sort of. He's not real used to practicing the theory of it and thus his reactions are vague gut-feelings and a lot of instinct.

Quill having issues is a constant source of worry to his family, although he reads it as disappointment rather than concern. Which, oddly, is one of his issues.
Yondu is referencing an event from the Out of Body cut scene "Adventures in Body-Sitting" where Darcy acts crazy to drive a deal their way. It's a good method of putting people off-balance.

Rocket is highly skeptical of Quill and his bullshitting about Terra, if only because he's done just enough research to spot some flaws. Groot on the other hand just wants Rocket to be happy and slightly more stable, so he's on the side of actually talking to the guy who shares a native planet with you.

Teaser:

“One of the best assassins on my planet used to dance in the Bolshoi.”
“How would you know that?” she asked. “Assassins aren’t usually well known.”
“I know her parents, they’re very proud of her.”
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

Before negotiations, tempers run hot and words are said.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Notashamed, Tsita, Joey99, Shadows_of_Shemai, Snodove30, quadrad, ValkyriePhoenix, QueenOfTheQuill, tigrislilium, SionnachOiche3, Oath, Selene_Aduial, jujubean, hhellcat, and Beth_Mac.

As a note, throughout the Guardians Arc I'll be lifting right from the movies because I'm not as secure in my muses for the galactic cast. It's not my usual style, but I need the training wheels for them right now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Man, you wouldn't believe what they charge for fuel out here,” Peter complained to Gamora. He didn't feel like drinking, and she didn’t seem to either. They might as well get to know each other better. “I might actually lose money on this job.”

“My connection is making us wait,” she complained. Peter resisted the urge to roll his eyes at how bad she was at this. Obviously she'd never done shady business without her homicidal Daddy looming in the background.

“It's just a negotiation tactic,” he assured her instead. “Trust me, this is my people's specialty. We're the negotiators, the traders and the deal-makers. We're also mostly bat-shit crazy, from what I can tell, but that just means you might be able to learn to do it too.”

She smiled and it was worth any amount of stupid joking to see that small, strangled thing sitting awkwardly on her face, like she wasn’t quite sure how it went. He’d seen her grin ferally and bare her teeth in a mocking, predatory joke of a smile, but this was the first genuinely amused look he’d seen on her. He liked it.

“My... father didn’t stress diplomacy,” she said, rolling her eyes. He caught the emphasis on the word father. He’d have to be deaf not to.

“Thanos?”

“He’s not my father;” she snapped. He raised one brow and she quirked her lips in wry self-aware humor. “When Thanos took my home world, he killed my parents in front of me. He tortured me, turned me into a weapon. When he said he was going to destroy an entire planet for Ronan, I...I couldn't stand by and...”

He got it. Well, maybe not all of it, he’d never been made to be a killer, only a thief. It was also unlikely that Thanos had ever held her after a bad illness and rubbed her back, or kissed minor
injuries when the other adults nearby weren’t looking, or gone out of his way to find the right batteries to power her mother’s dying gift. He must have been fingering the Walkman, because Gamora’s fingers closed over his and lifted it to look at more closely.

“Why would you risk your life for this?”

“My mother gave it to me,” he said. “It’s all I have from her. My mom liked to share with me all the pop songs that she loved growing up. I happened to have it on me when I was…the day that she…You know, when I left Earth.”

“Oh?” Gamora tilted her head and Peter smiled. He could at least show her that it could get better, could heal some.

“I was a kid when Yondu picked me up. He raised me, but Earth is still my home. It matters to me because…” He shrugged. “I mean the Walkman even, it matters because it’s like I’m taking Mom with me. She said my Dad promised to show her the stars, but never got the chance. So now I’m doing it.”

“What do you do with it?” she asked and he gaped.

“Do?” He paused, thinking how to explain entertainment to someone who seemed so cut off from anything soft or kind. “It plays music, and you listen to it. Or you can dance.”

“I’m a warrior and an assassin,” she said firmly, with the air of someone who’s been told something often enough they’ve started to think it’s true. “I do not dance.”

“Really?” he asked, skeptically raising an eyebrow. “One of the best assassins on my planet used to dance in the Bolshoi. That’s a famous ballet troupe, they do these complex things on their toes and jump a lot. It’s pretty.”

“How would you know that?” she asked. “Assassins aren’t usually well known.”

“I know her parents, they’re very proud of her.” He shrugged. “But aside from your sister from another species, all Terrans know dancing is important. There’s a legend about it. Well, a really famous movie that’s basically a legend. It’s called “Footloose” and in it, a great hero named…he paused, trying to recall Kevin Bacon’s character’s name before giving up. “Kevin Bacon, teaches an entire city full of people with sticks up their butts that dancing is the greatest thing there is.”

“Who put the sticks up their butts?” she asked.

“What?” he asked, derailed. “No, that’s just a…”

“That is cruel.”

“You’re teasing me, I can tell. What is it with assassins and bad jokes at my expense?”

“Maybe a little,” she admitted. “It’s funny. What sort of music do you have on it?”

He put the headphones on her by way of answer, adjusting them so they’d be comfortable, and turned it on. Her face went through five different emotional breakthroughs and he smiled.

“The melody is pleasant!” she said loudly, trying to speak over the headphones. He drifted closer to her, the urge he’d been fighting to hug her and tell her everything would be alright growing hard to ignore. Her simple wonder at something as normal as music told him more than she could say about how Thanos had groomed her. It wasn’t even raising, when you deprived a child of music, it was
straight up brainwashing and grooming for abuse. Suddenly Gamora pulled a knife and put it to his
throat.

“No!” she shouted at him. His brain went through seven reasons she might react this way before
stopping because he didn’t want to imagine some things.

“Ow!” he yelped, backing up fast, and hitting the balcony edge. “What the hell?”

“I know who you are, Peter Quill,” she hissed in his face, a look of pure menace in her eyes. He
slammed backwards into the safety of his mind.

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“I know who you are, Peter Quill,” hissed the scary woman. Sandra leaned back and away, setting
her feet like Cousin Darcy and Cousin Natasha taught her. She did say she wanted more of the
responsibility, but now she was regretting diving in without looking. “And I am not some starry-eyed
waif here to succumb to your…your pelvic sorcery!”

“Woah, eew!” Sandra screwed up her face in disgust. “He brought me in during that? Ugh, gross.
No offense.”

“What are you saying?” she asked, pulling back. Sandra adjusted the sleeves of Peter’s dorky coat
and tried to shake the strangeness of talking about it. It was too late to take it back, anyway.

“Peter’s not normal. He’s not always just him, sometimes he’s me. Or Cousin Darcy. Or Cousin
Bucky. There’s like five of us on our end. Haven’t you noticed?”

“I assumed that was simply his idiocy,” the woman admitted, looking ashamed. Sandra was distantly
proud of figuring that out. “I’m Gamora.”

“Sandra,” she offered a hand. Gamora looked at it. “You uh, hold it and then we move our hands
up and down a bit. It came from when ancient Terrans used to check each other for weapons, only
nobody wears wrist blades anymore except Cousin Darcy and her daughters, so we don’t bother
grabbing wrists. It’s just a polite thing when you meet someone.”

“Oh, this seems reasonable,” Gamora said, and gave a short firm shake. A crash startled Sandra and
they looked in the bar.

“Oh no,” Sandi sighed. “That looks bad. Does that raccoon have a gun?”

“Our companions are going to kill each other,” Gamora said dryly.

“I’ll get Cousin Darcy, she’s good at bar fights.”

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Darcy stepped in as Sandi pulled out. Gamora, the Elphaba cosplayer from last time was stepping
between Rocket and Drax.

“Stop it!” Gamora commanded. It had little effect and Darcy rolled Peter’s shoulders to settle herself
in the larger body. Then she threw herself forward between the large grey man with the magenta
tattoos and his intended victim.

“What the fuck, man! What are you doing?”

“This vermin speaks of affairs he knows nothing about!” shouted Drax as Gamora tried to pull
Rocket back.

“That is true!” Rocket shouted back. Darcy noticed the strain of drunkenness under his accent.

“He has no respect!” Drax shouted. She eyed him up as being similar to Thor, and noted the need for honor in the larger opponent.

“That is also true!” Darcy began to piece together the story, but it was still shaky. Even she couldn’t make peace come out of half a stack of intel.

“Hold on!” she shouted, breathing deep and forcing the power from the diaphragm out into a bellow. Not as good as Steve’s, but better than her own. Yay longer, deeper vocal chords. “Hold on!”

“Keep calling me vermin, tough guy!” Rocket screamed at Drax. The pain in his tone was way too close for comfort. He sounded like a living time bomb, and she really didn’t want to be there when he went boom; that was never any fun for anybody. “You just wanna laugh at me like everyone else!”

“Rocket, I think you’re drunk. Alright?” Darcy asked, trying to find a rapport. “It makes everything way too easy to read into, and stupid shit looks really smart when it isn’t.”

“He thinks I’m some stupid thing!” Rocket screamed. “He does! Well, I didn’t ask to get made! I didn’t ask to be torn apart, and put back together, over and over and turned into some…some little monster!”

“Rocket, no one…” Darcy started. Rocket began howling at a pitch she knew too well.

“He called me vermin!” he yelled, pointing his gun at Drax, then he rounded on Gamora. “She called me rodent! Let’s see if you can laugh after five or six good shots to your frickin’ face!”

“SHUT UP AND LISTEN TO ME!” Darcy shouted. Rocket jumped a bit. “Nobody wants to be hurt that way. Nobody asks to be taken apart and have someone stick their hands in your brain and… and play. Nobody asks to be ripped away from everyone they ever loved and warped and twisted. To have bits torn off and replaced just because they’ve made you into a thing, a fucking weapon and weapons can be modded and field stripped and packed up when you aren’t using them. Nobody ever, I mean ever, asked to be made and remade until there’s nothing of the original left. It happens, sure, but we didn’t ask for it. None of us asked to be made, and you aren’t special because you got fucked over by life. So stop bitching that you don’t want to be what you are and start figuring out what you do want to be, or Buddy your life is going to be a string of disappointments and broken friendships.”

Rocket heaved a sigh that was half sob, and Drax put his hand on her shoulder. Darcy shrugged it off.

“Companion,” Drax said slowly. “If you…”

“Don’t.” Darcy ordered, pulling her focus back. “His issues rubbed my issues wrong, that’s all. Look, can we just suck this up for one more night? I got a bet riding on making it through the weekend.”

Rocket huffed and holstered his weapon. “Fine. But I can’t promise when all this is over I’m not gonna kill every last one of you jerks.”

“And you know what?” Darcy said with resignation, “that’s exactly why people like you and me don’t get to have nice things until we learn to play well with others. Five seconds after you meet
somebody, you’re already threatening to kill them! Oy vey.”

“We have traveled halfway across the quadrant, and Ronan is no closer to being dead,” Drax complained, turning away from them and preparing to storm out.

“Drax!” Darcy snapped, and Drax whirled on his foot to face her. “Get your well-muscled ass back here before you get yourself dead. I know a suicidal grudge when I see one, and you are just as drunk as Rocket.”

“I do not take orders from you, Peter Quill,” Drax growled. “I will not harm you for acting like I do, because you are obviously in great pain, but do not do it again.”

“Let him go,” Gamora said, grabbing Darcy’s arm. “We don’t need him.”

She was about to object when a pink skinned woman in a white dress who did not fit the aesthetic walked in.

“Milady Gamora, I’m here to fetch you for my master,” she said.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Groomed: In this context, a preparation for later abuse, conditioning and training reactions.
Intell: Intelligence or information.

Notes:
Peter is starting to see the differences between how Gamora grew up and his thing with Yondu or even Natasha. He doesn’t mean to be poking at open wounds, but the places Gamora needs to heal aren’t the same. At the same time, Gamora is unlearning a lifetime of toxic ideas and needs space to waffle about if Thanos is still going to be “Father” in her head or not.

The Red Room girls in the comics all trained to dance ballet and one of their covers was a dancer in the Bolshoi, or sometimes the Russian National Ballet, although that in modern times is a British touring ballet troupe. My version is that they all learned ballet, and the ones still standing when they were old enough to perform were dancers.

Five points to anyone who can name Kevin Bacon’s character from Footloose! I had to look it up.

I’m going to have to add a tag for Thanos’ A+ Parenting, probably. So general statement here, if you at any point recognize techniques used to parent Gamora, including but not limited to: control of social environment (ie cutting off friendships or driving away adults that can help), constant negative talk about you, setting up conflict between siblings, or using medical care or lack thereof as a punishment, GET HELP NOW. www.childhelp.org has a list of local CPS hotline numbers. They also have a page of explanations under “what is child abuse” if you aren’t sure if it’s abuse or not.

Sandra sees Peter like an older brother and as such is massively squicked by being brought in during any sexy stuff. She’s also a bit of a late bloomer and unsure of her
own sexuality situation, so it's upsetting beyond the family issue.

The explanation that Sandra gives is one fairly good history of the handshake, and it's one I think her more martial family would have taught her.

Men tend to have longer vocal chords, meaning it's easier to reach that deep tone used in a bellow. Women can train to bellow and a female opera singer will certainly out shout an untrained man, but taking training out of the equation, there's really no substitute for long chords.

Darcy's explosion is understandable, but I want to clarify a few points. She's pretty harsh in telling Rocket to get over himself, and usually I wouldn't have an empathetic character like Darcy invalidate someone's reaction to pain, but Rocket is hurting himself and others in his pain. Also, she's in pain herself and that's almost as good as drunk for making stupid shit look smart.

Teaser:

“Get down! Ficus in the hole!”
Chapter 66

Chapter Summary

The Trip to the Collector Goes Poorly, And Other Vast Understatements.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Beth_Mac, quadrad, hhhellcat, Joey99, Maharet, jujubean, Shadows_of_Shemai, ValkyriePhoenix, Tsita, QueenOfTheQuill, minishadowsoul, ClockWeasel, Dances_With_Vulcans, tigrislilium, Wynni, and Selene_Aduial.

Reminder that as soon as everyone was looking at Carina, Darcy went home to get emotional first aid, and this is all Peter except where noted.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rocket wiped his eyes when everyone was looking at the Krylorian. He didn’t need anybody thinking any crap about him. The Boot of Jemiah just made really strong drinks, that was all.

I’m sorry I left you alone, Groot said. You were hurting and I was a bad friend.

“Shut up,” Rocket told his friend. “I was a jackass and you don’t have to put up with me. I don’t know why you do, sometimes.”

You don’t have to know why yet, Groot told him. You will at some point.

“Whatever,” Rocket mumbled. He didn’t always like the faith Groot put in him. It meant he was more likely to let his only friend down. Turning his mind away from that idea, he looked around at the place they were being led through, full of glass cases with things and creatures in them. “Okay, this isn’t creepy at all.”

It reminds me of Halfworld, Groot muttered. Of course it’s creepy. We won’t be here long, hopefully.

“We house the galaxy’s largest collection of fauna, relics, and species of all manner,” said the Krylorian chick. “I present to you, Taneleer Tivan, the Collector.”

Gamora and the Collector dick walked towards each other, sort of like mating birds, or maybe two predators about to fight for territory.

“Oh, my dear Gamora,” enthused the white-haired man as he bent over her hand. “How wonderful to meet in the flesh.”

“Let’s bypass the formalities,” Gamora suggested and Rocket had to admit that felt way better than doing more of the creepy social weirdness. He preferred blowing shit up, it was cleaner. “We have what we discussed.”
The Collector noticed Groot, and a greedy look lit his eyes. Rocket knew that look, it was a man who would always want more than what he had and intended to take it. Rocket had worked for that kind before, and they paid well, but he hated having that look pointed at Groot.

“What is that thing there?”

I am an exiled Flora Colossus of the Planet X, a bounty hunter and a warrior and a friend, but I am not a thing, Groot said. Of course, it sounded like “I am Groot.”

“I never thought I’d meet a Groot,” the Collector said, sighing. “Sir, you must allow me to pay you now so that I may own your carcass. At the moment of your death, of course.”

Of course, Groot agreed amiably. It would depend on if you’re willing to come and collect my remains so I don’t have to prearrange shipping.

“Why, so he could turn you into a frickin’ chair?” Rocket asked, appalled his friend would volunteer to spend eternity in this fucking nightmare zone.

Don’t worry, it takes a lot for me to die, and he’s paying cash up front. I won’t leave you if I can help it, Groot told him in the quiet tone that only the two of them understood. It’s unlikely that my people would honor any last will assigning a mammal my heir anyway, I’d like to know I did one last thing to piss them off when I go.

“That’s your pet?” asked the arrogant dick.

“His what?!” Rocket demanded and went for his blaster. The Collector laughed at him and Gamora stepped between them, trying to keep Rocket from killing their payday. Which was probably smart but also made him angry. Hopefully they’d get a chance to kill something soon.

“Tivan, we have been halfway around the galaxy, retrieving this orb.”

“Very well, then,” he said, clapping his hands. “Let us see what you brought.”

Everyone looked at Peter, who pulled the orb from his bag. He almost fumbled it too, and Rocket rolled his eyes.

“Oh, my new friends,” the Collector said, schmooze oozing out of his tone, activating a holographic screen set and adding visual aids to his pompous asshole routine. “My new, wonderful friends. Do you know what you have brought me?”

“No, and I don’t really care,” Rocket scoffed.

“I do,” Quill said, shooting Rocket a hard look. Rocket looked away. He didn’t want to think about the things Quill had said, the way he had smelled like pain and anger, like Halfworld.

“Before creation itself,” said the Collector, ignoring them. He proceeded to ramble about singularities and ingots of time and space and reality and whatever all. It sounded like Hyparian bullshit, the universe having a soul or some shit that explained not wearing clothing and doing a shit ton of drugs. Not that Rocket was opposed to chemically assisted living, but he liked his drug dens unphilosophical. Of course, the visual aides were nice to look at while the pompous ass lectured.

On the screens, giant beings threw about massive amounts of power, destroying worlds and then falling in the same colored waves of energy they’d used to flatten things moments before. Rocket didn’t approve of that level of kickback on a weapon, it was inelegant.
“Seems sort of dumb to have a weapon that mows you down same as the planet you’re killing,” he remarked.

“Infinity Stones are immensely powerful, and never used lightly,” explained the Collector. “They can be forces of great creation as well as destruction, but they cannot be controlled long before the sheer power overwhelms the mortal using them. Once, for a moment, a group was able to share the energy amongst themselves, but even they were quickly destroyed by it.”

The orb opened to reveal an Infinity Stone, glowing purple and sinister. Beside him, Peter shifted in preparation for a fight. Rocket picked up on the subtle scent change he’d noticed before, Quill was readying to pull some kind of crazy yet successful fight mojo out his ass.

“Blah, blah, blah,” Rocket said, drawing attention away from Quill. He’d prefer not to be in that guy’s zone of damage when he lost it. He had that whack-a-doodle look in his eyes like the killers that made the headlines the day after. “We’re all very fascinated by your little history lesson on sparkly bric-a-brac, but we’d like to get paid.”

“How would you like to get paid?” the ass asked as if there were any better way than the spendable way, and Rocket snorted.

“What do you think, fancy man? Units!” Dealing with idiots was the worst.

The Krylorian walked in, looking hypnotized or some shit, and reached out to touch the stone.

“Carina,” the Collector snapped. “Stand back.”

“I will no longer be your slave!” she shouted and Peter grab-tackled her snapping shut the orb on his way past. He whispered something in her ear and bounced to his feet holding the orb.

“New deal,” he said, and his face was fury and death and Rocket felt a primitive urge to run or hide or piss himself. “You let all your slaves go, free any living exhibits in this hellhole, and I don’t use this to blow your head clean off your shoulders.”

“No!” the Collector rebuked. “The Stones cannot be used by any living being.”

“Recently they’ve been used by Terrans,” Quill said sternly. Rocket watched pain and anger and fear dash in lightning fast sparks across Quill’s face, a shift of the head, a dart of tongue across lip, a narrowing of the eyes. Quill looked like a cornered animal, dangerous and unpredictable. “Granted, mostly by evil as fuck Terrans who shouldn’t be trusted with that power, but regardless, Terrans. I’m Terran. So you’ve got to ask yourself one question. Are you feeling lucky Punk?”

Peter was grateful to Jillian for lending him a hand with reflexes, but after the orb was shut he was fine taking the controls again. Darcy had been an absolute wreck after the fight in the bar, and Steve and Bucky had dropped out to help her. Which left the less-than-diplomatic Jillian, and Sandra, who he intended to keep as far from this nonsense as he could.

“Trust me, I can get you out safely,” he whispered to Carina. “Don’t kill yourself.”

She nodded, still crying, and he stood, pulling out every inch of anger and indignation and pain he could to impress the seriousness of his words on this Taneleer Tivan.

“New deal. You let all your slaves go, free any living exhibits in this hellhole, and I don’t use this to blow your head clean off your shoulders.”
“The Stones cannot be used by any living being,” Tivan said, grasping at straws. Distantly, Peter registered that he was being stupid, but he didn’t care. He’d seen how scared Jane had been of Infinity Stones during a discussion about the big bad Darcy was gearing up to fight. His friends, his people, had already suffered for this sort of power.

“Recently they’ve been used by Terrans,” he replied.

Tivan’s lip trembled, a sign of understanding, perhaps, maybe just a sign he wasn’t willing to call the bluff. It was a bluff, or at least Peter hoped it was a bluff, he wasn’t actually sure where he’d fall on the hero to zero scale. He really didn’t want Tivan pushing him and it looked like he might. Peter wasn’t sure which answer he’d be more afraid of, that he’d risk touching an Infinity Stone even knowing he was supposed to live to do something big, or that he wouldn’t have the guts when the time came. Either was… well, bad.

Peter squared his shoulders to prepare to fight, in any way he needed to. He forced his mind to remember how Jane skirted away from discussing the Aether that dug its way under her skin, the images that sometimes flicked across the mindscape as Thor slept of black-red ooze lashing out. He licked his suddenly dry lips and focused on how Darcy and Steve growled when the Tesseract was brought up. They still remembered the Red Skull using it and once Darcy had shown him a memory of the Nazi bastard dying with it in his hand, trying to fill out a star map with the reference points behind his disintegrating face. He stuck his chin out in challenge, and narrowed his eyes as he recalled how Loki couldn’t meet Bucky’s eyes as he listed the names of the domains: Space, Mind, Reality, Time, Power, and Soul. Nothing good had ever come of these damn rocks. Ever.

“Granted,” he said with a pointed shrug of calculated apathy, “mostly by evil as fuck Terrans who shouldn’t be trusted with that level of destructive might, but regardless, Terrans.”

Tivan looked at him, like he didn’t quite understand what had happened or where the conversation had gone. Peter got that a lot, he was prepared to hold Tivan’s hand through the process of realizing how badly he done fucked up.

“*I’m Terran,*” Peter clarified, and twisted the edge of the orb a bit. “So you’ve got to ask yourself one question. Are you feeling lucky… Punk?”

“You’re bluffing,” Tivan said with a laugh. “You almost had me, but you’re bluffing. A child playing at heroics. Give me the orb.”

“I’m really not,” Peter said, nodding to Gamora. He could only hope she’d grab Carina, and he trusted Groot to look after Rocket. He snapped open the orb with a flick, sending the orb out and up, catching a plant as Tivan dodged. His aim was much better with a yo-yo, apparently. Purple light burned through the leaves in a cascade of sinister shadows. “Fuck.”

“Give me that,” Gamora hissed, grabbing the orb from his hand and slamming it closed as the evil death-rock dropped through the bottom leaf. Peter grabbed Carina around the waist as the plant continued to glow purple.

“Get down! Ficus in the hole!”

The blast broke every glass prison open and he felt blood hit his upper lip. He balled his fist as Tivan came at him to retrieve Carina and punched, hard. Once the Collector was down, he hauled the girl up and out of the wreckage, trying not to need to lean too much.

“Quill?” asked Gamora as she put the orb gently into his bag.
“I think we can agree, mistakes were made,” Peter muttered as the world started to go dim at the edges and all the lights were tinged with the amber of oncoming unconsciousness.

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“How could I think Tivan could contain whatever was within the orb?” Gamora asked herself. They’d just barely made it out alive, Peter Quill was still unable to stand, and she’d suddenly understood what Thanos had wanted the orb for.

“What do you still have it for?” Rocket asked Quill. Carina, the servant that Quill had rescued from herself was tending to him, but he seemed merely dazed.

“Well what were we gonna do, leave it in there?” Quill asked. “That’s a brilliant plan.”

“I can’t believe you had that in your purse!” Rocket insisted, on the edge of hysterics.

“Well, for one, it’s not a purse, it’s a knapsack, there are structural differences that drastically alter the aesthetic, and for two, the Stones are basically harmless when contained. Also, we may need to go back in, Tivan already had one Infinity Stone, and the Aether was contained in something that may or may not have broken during that.” Quill said, waving at the destruction. “I wish you’d told me you were going to give him a Stone, I could have warned you it was a bad idea.”

Gamora blinked. “I can’t deal with a second one of these. One is too much.”

“I will go secure it,” Carina offered. “I know where he stores things, and I owe you my life, Peter Quill.”

Peter nodded and Gamora thought she saw someone else hiding behind his eyes. She didn’t know who, she wasn’t sure she’d met this person. Quill, or whoever he was, struggled to his feet.

“We have to bring this to the Nova Corps,” Gamora said firmly. “There’s a chance they can contain it.”

“Are you kidding me?” Rocket shouted. “We’re wanted by the Nova Corps! Just give it to Ronan!”

Peter turned to rebut Rocket, then fell over.

“Typical,” Rocket complained.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Schmooze: oily or overly charming behavior.
Hyparian: relating unto the people of Hyparia, a planet of hippy-like aliens I made up.
Whack-a-doodle: crazy.
Bric-a-brac: trinkets or knicknacks, cheap toys.

Notes:
The Collector doesn't actually fully understand Groot, he knows how to translate the audible tone into and idea-concept, but he doesn't catch any of the nuance that Rocket gets. Meanwhile, Groot has an intensely pragmatic approach to death and Rocket doesn't like thinking of anything After Groot.
Flora Collosus are notorious in the Marvel universe for being incredibly racist against fauna-life, particularly mammals. Groot's friendship with Rocket would be very much assumed to be an owner-pet dynamic on Planet X and that's what the Collector is picking up on.

Rocket likes big guns. Rocket does not like badly made big guns. He sees the risk level on using a Stone as a weapon as a major design flaw, because it reduces usability.

Rocket, like Logan back in Bodies in Time, can smell the pheromone shift of a swap, although he can also smell the addition of anyone in the mindscape when Peter uses it, because his nose is better. In this case, he doesn't parse it as additional female scent, because he's never smelled a human female, he parses it as "Quill's about to fuck shit up" because that's what Darcy and Jillian do.

"Are you feeling lucky... Punk?" is a line from Dirty Harry. It works in the movie, which is why Peter uses it, but it's a movie, which is why Tivan calls his bluff.

Peter uses a translator chip to speak, and so sometimes the exact words don't stay the same in other's POV. The meaning does, but the exact words don't.

When any plant explodes, anyone exposed to the Avenge-fam's humor will call it a ficus. Because nobody is ever going to let Maya live down the ficus incident.

"I think we can agree, mistakes were made" is a line from Dogma.

After Peter passes out the first time, someone else, probably Steve, takes over so that Peter isn't left undefended. He passes out the second time because Peter wakes up and shoves Steve out without really being fully aware. He doesn't go fully unconscious, just falls over.

Teaser:

“Nearly indestructible and indestructible are not the same thing!”
Peter struggled up through the murk of having been knocked out, back into his body. He sort of processed being held, and someone saying his name, but he woke to Rocket slapping him.

“Offa me,” he ordered, sitting up. “What’d I miss?”

“No much, you passed out after she suggested giving the very valuable bomb in your purse to the cops,” Rocket said, sitting back with a sigh. “I still say we oughta just give it to Ronan. He wants it, we want to get paid, we have it and he has money. Problem solved.”

“So,” Peter said slowly, trying to process what had happened in between passing out after the exploding plant and waking up. “We go to Ronan, and hope the genocidal maniac doesn’t kill us for existing, try to negotiate to sell him something he sent Gamora to steal, again trying to not get murdered to death, and when he gets it, what? He can destroy the galaxy? Hard pass.”

“What are you tryin’ ta do, be some Saint all of a sudden?” Rocket demanded. Peter quirked a brow, that was a very Earth-culture specific phrase that didn’t translate well into Galactic common. Rocket, somehow, knew about Catholicism, and Peter’s head hurt from that. “What has the galaxy ever done for you?”

“I’m not a Saint, and I never tried to be,” Peter retorted, trying to force the image of Rocket eating those little wafer things out of his mind. “I’m not even Catholic, I am pretty sure you have to be Catholic. And dead. I’m actively avoiding the dead part right now.”

“You know what I mean, Quill,” Rocket sighed. “We’ve been fucking over hard by this galaxy. Why would you wanna save it?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Peter snarked, shying away from what sounded suspiciously like sympathy from someone who’d been literally tortured by mad scientists. Sarcasm was an old friend and safe place for him. “Maybe because I’m one of the idiots who lives in it!”

“Peter, listen to me,” Gamora said, her eyes drilling into him. “We cannot allow the stone to fall into Ronan’s hands. You don’t know him like I do, and what’s more… my sister is still with him and she will kill everyone I care about the second she sees a chance. It’s how we were raised.”
Peter tried to process that and failed. Gamora’s life was a damn soap opera. He opened his mouth to tell her he agreed, but what came out was “you care about us?”

“I haven’t killed you myself yet,” she said with a shrug. “That would be enough for Nebula. But we have to go back to your ship and deliver the stone to Nova. They might be able to handle protecting it.”

“Right, right,” he said, nodding. “Okay. I think you’re right.”

“I think I’m getting paid one way or another, asshole,” Rocket said, jabbing a pointed claw into Peter’s thigh. “And I’m not going back to jail.”

“Or we could give it to somebody really nice, who’s not going to arrest us,” Peter suggested. “Then Rocket can get the bounty on me from Yondu and we all go our separate ways. I think that’s a really good balance between both of your points of view.”

“Do you know anyone like that?” Gamora asked harshly before turning away from him. “I don’t. Tivan was the closest, actually.”

“Gamora…” he began, hoping to pull her out of the self-loathing spiral he could see coming. Only as he reached for her shoulder, he saw her back tense. He didn’t want to be stabbed to death, so he paused.

“Oh, no,” she breathed. “Ronan.”

Out of nowhere, Drax joined them, a manic grin on his face.

“At last! I shall meet my foe and destroy him.”

“You called Ronan?” Peter screeched. “What the hell? We aren’t ready to face him, we’re gonna get murdered!”

Yondu rolled his eyes as he spotted Peter, about to get swarmed by Sakaarians. “Quill! Don’t you move, Boy!” he shouted. “I’m coming to get you!”

Peter heaved a sigh of obvious relief, and nudged a woman with his elbow. Of course, there was a woman. Yondu made a mental note to have another talk with Peter about being safe with women, like for instance, not having one in your ship when you were swiping a heist from the group, and not dragging one into what looked like a forming Sakaarian bloodbath. Just because the buggers went down easy didn’t mean enough couldn’t kill a man.

“Don’t you move!” he shouted again, as a small fuzzy critter he recognised as a bounty hunter grabbed Peter’s coat and pointed at the tell-tale pink of a Krylorian running into the warren of Knowhere. It was almost like he was trying to get him to move, but Peter stayed put and the critter stormed off beside what looked to be a moving tree. Then he saw the leader of the force of Sakaarians, some blue lady, draw aim at Peter. Yondu saw red for a moment and raised his own blaster. “Get out of the way!”

“When do you want?” Peter demanded, stepping off to one side and pulling his own weapons. “You sure took your time, you know.”

“What mess have you got yerself in this time, Boy?” Yondu sighed.
“Um, we kinda stole from Ronan and I’m making serious thought about deciding to take certain parties mistreating their kids personally,” Peter said grimly. “Don’t tell Darcy about that last bit, she’ll make it very hard to do anything until blood is on the starways.”

“RONAN!!!” Yondu shouted. “What kind of moronic, suicidal, jackassery got you involved with Ronan, and why aren’t we running yet?”

“Um, Gamora here used to work for him and Drax there hates his guts.” Peter rolled his shoulders. “I feel bad leaving Drax to die, and also I have this really horrible feeling that blue woman is probably able to chew me up and spit me out at fifty paces.”

“She is,” said Gamora, the green one. “That’s my sister, she’s been heavily modified to be one of the best fighters in the galaxy. Her littlest finger is probably more deadly than your entire body.”

“Doubling down the don’t-tell-Darcy plan,” Peter mumbled.

Just then the ship behind the Sakaarian troops opened and Ronan, the homicidal bastard himself, stepped off his ship. A big fella drew two large knives and faced off with the Kree maniac, a crazy grin plastered on his face.

“Ronan the Accuser!” the suicidally brave knifeman shouted.

“You are the one who transmitted the message?” Ronan asked, and Yondu quirked a brow as Peter heaved a weary sigh.

“You killed my wife,” the man shouted. “You killed my daughter!”

“Oh,” Yondu said. There wasn’t a competent star-captain this side of the Core that hadn’t dealt with at least one blood feud. It said something for Peter that he was standing by his man in his, said he was growin’ up. It took a man to set his feet beside someone who was entering a battle to the death, and if they survived it, Peter would be worthy of a crew.

“Cap’n?” Kraglin asked.

“Signal the Eclector,” Yondu said with a nod. “Quill’s begun his Transition Trials. It was a rough start, but he deserves the chance at it, same as any.”

“Yondu?” Peter asked as Kraglin ran back to the landing ship.

“I’ll be waiting, when you get done here,” Yondu said. “Unless you want to call off the Trial?”

“No, I can do this,” Peter said grimly. “Hell of a time, though.”

always is, kid, always is, Yondu thought.

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Nebula snarled as her sister took the bag from the pale-skinned male beside her and darted back out of the way. Another, shirtless, male was brandishing weapons, and a tree-like beast was clearing civilians away from the square the battle would be joined in.

“It is Gamora. She is escaping with the orb.”

Nebula turned back to board their ship, not intending to let her sister run away again. Ronan turned to join her, and the shirtless one ran towards Ronan, knives at the ready, screaming in pain. He moved to strike her current employer with his knife, but Ronan was a highly skilled fighter, and
easily dodged the wild attack.

“Nebula, retrieve the orb,” Ronan ordered.

She nodded once in affirmation, and boarded the ship. Her traitor sister couldn’t outrun her forever. Gamora was the better fighter, but Nebula was the tenacious one. It didn’t even matter that Gamora had found mining pos for herself and her new… companions. Nebula also had companions, in far better equipped ships, ones with actual weaponry.

“The stone is in the furthest pod,” she instructed her troops. “Bring it down!”

She ducked down under a civilian vessel and swerved to avoid losing time to a collision with a sign. She hated flying in Knowhere, the hazards almost made it slower than walking. She could tell her sister was making for a part of the port where ships could put down and refuel cheaply. Well, cheaper at least, than the rest of the port. Not that it was difficult to be cheaper than the rest of Knowhere.

Unfortunately, Gamora’s new friends were annoyingly resourceful.

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Bad enough Rocket had to leave Groot dirt-side because of the size of the only functional escape vehicles, but the machine was barely a vehicle at all. He was cursing the lack of functional space-guidance, g-dampers, or weaponry when Quill rode up beside him all chummy-like.

“Rocket, keep them off Gamora until she gets to the Milano,” Quill ordered, and half of Rocket wanted to tell him to go fuck a Tarantellan cactus, but so far, Quill had been the only one who seemed to sort of understand anything about Rocket. Aside from Groot, obviously, Groot was the best friend a science experiment could have.

“How?” he asked instead. “We’ve got no weaponry on these things.”

“These pods are industrial grade,” Quill pointed out, “they’re nearly indestructible.”

Rocket sighed. He’d had this conversation with Groot at least five times now, and it was getting old. “Nearly indestructible and indestructible are not the same thing!”

“They are fairly sturdy,” Gamora chimed in on the com-line.

“Not against necroblasts, they’re not,” Rocket pointed out.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” Quill said firmly. “Are you a scavenger or aren’t you?”

Rocket grinned as he felt the idea hit. A strange feeling, one sort of like warmth and fear and longing struck his gut. He could work with this plan. He swung his pod wide, crashing into two pods, shearing the backs off them with the force of the bounce. Quill ducked in one with a stupid quip and Rocket relaxed into the too-large cushion of the pod’s seat. This was something else.

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Gamora looked at her options, calculated the least risk and highest reward, and made a bad decision. She tapped her com-line and sent one last message.

“Quill, I’m trapped,” she said. “I can’t make it to the Milano, I have to head out.”

“What?” he demanded. “Wait! These things aren’t meant to go out there. You’ll get lost!”
“Well, then at least this accursed thing goes with me,” she muttered and turned up into the edge of the atmosphere. His com-line sputtered and died with the radio shell of Knowhere between them. She saw Nebula on her tail and hit the fuel injectors, only to have them jam.

“You are a disappointment, sister,” Nebula purred. “Of all our siblings, I hated you the least.”

“Nebula, please,” Gamora begged. She hated begging, but it would soothe the angry, hungry ache in her sister that made her cruel when she didn’t need to be. “If Ronan gets this stone he’ll kill us all.”

“Not all. You will already be dead,” Nebula said, her voice a harsh growl. She dropped it to something softer, trying to avoid being heard, perhaps. “I can give you that much peace, my Sister.”

The world exploded.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Doubling down: to double a bet, or to increase a desire to fulfil a plan.
Transition Trials: a Ravager rite of passage that I invented, meant to sort who's good at being Crew, who's better at being Officers, and who deserves to be a Captain. They involve completing a mission with only who you personally recruit.
G-dampers: mechanism for cutting down the g forces of rapid acceleration.
Chummy-like: friendly, not in a polite way.

Notes:
Peter recalls the pre-explosion part of the evening, but not the aftermath part.
Rocket is relating to Peter as though what Darcy revealed about herself is Peter's background. Peter is reacting like someone who knows for a fact he doesn't have that shared background. He's got other issues, but not that.

Reminder, Peter in this 'verse knows Yondu won't kill him. Yondu knows Peter is aware of that, but he also has to make it look good for the crew, hence the ambiguous "coming to get you" phrasing. That's a major departure from canon, so I'll try to make it clear when that comes into play.

Peter doesn't want to deal with Angry Darcy in his head trying to gut Thanos. So he's keeping certain relevant facts to himself until he has time and leave from the Ravagers to go get her so she can kick Titan ass personally. Because he knows Darcy hates everything Thanos has ever been or done in relation to her, her family, and people who bear way too close a resemblance to her kids.

Sticking by your crew was a big part of pirate honor and law in the Golden Age of Piracy, where I get much of my Ravager inspiration. Being willing to be a man's second in a duel (sort of like Peter standing with Drax) was something that separated good Captains with loyal, healthy, effective crews, from bad Captains with lazy, weak, or ill crews. Knowing that about the officers influenced the choices people made when signing on.

Not coincidentally, I've created the idea of the Trials to mean if he wins, the crew has to
accept that he wasn't being scummy when he took the orb to start with.

I always saw that scene with Nebula and Gamora as being bittersweet. Nebula does love Gamora, as much as she's been allowed. In her mind, death quickly by one who loves you is better than watching the universe burn for the madman you call Father. She knows Gamora would agree, since she's already tried to break away, she just doesn't share Gamora's optimism about them having a chance at a life without Thanos or Ronan, or someone similar.

Teaser:

"I hope, for your sake, that you feel like shit."
Near-death experiences always bring out the best in people.

Or at least the snarkiest.

Love Fest! To Joey99, Shadows_of_Shemai, Tsita, Beth_Mac, Notashamed, Wynni, SionnachOiche3, Selene_Aduial, ClockWeasel, hhhellcat, tigrislilium, and nemohana.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter and Rocket watched Gamora’s body in horror as it floated free in the thin bubble of sorta-air that surrounded space stations. Peter cut back a howl, burying his pain deep and hardening it into razor sharp ability, a skill he’d been taught by Darcy and had hoped never to use.

“Quill, come on,” Rocket said softly, kinder than Peter thought the little scavenger could be. “Her body mods should keep her alive a couple more minutes, but there’s nothing we can do for her.”

“Then give me the couple more minutes,” Peter said, slapping the com panel in frustration.

“Ronan, it is done,” said a harsh voice. He must have accidentally switched to the same frequency Nebula was using.

“Nebula, I want to hate you for what you did to Gamora,” Peter began, “but I know someone who loves someone like you, and she’d tell you family always forgives when there’s real regret involved. So I hope, for your sake, that you feel like shit.”

There was a pause that felt longer than it probably was.

“I will remove Ronan before he drowns the fool who sent for us. Do not contact me again.”

Peter switched back to Rocket’s com, coming in on a nice string of swear words. It resolved down and finally, Rocket sighed.

“These pods aren’t meant to be out here. In a second, we’re gonna be in the same boat.”

“Go back to Knowhere and get Drax and Groot,” Peter ordered. “I’m about to do something stupid.”

“Quill?”

“If this doesn’t work, tell Yondu I give you full vouch and you can have the Milano if and only if you let Kraglin run all the tune-ups.” Rocket started swearing again, and Peter switched the hand-com to the Ravager emergency frequency.
“Yondu! Yondu! This is Quill! My coordinates are two-two-seven-K-three-two-four.”

“Quill? Quill, what are you doing?” Rocket demanded.

“I’m doing the right thing, go back to Groot,” Peter told him. “Yondu, I’m just outside Knowhere. If you’re there, come get me. I failed the Trial, I give up, just get me and Gamora, please.”

He put on his mask and cracked the seal on the pod. His skin tingled as the safeties tried to overcome the cold, the vacuum, and the sweat of fear on his skin. It wouldn’t work, but it could buy him a minute. He pushed out and tapped the jump-boots on, shooting towards the floating, still, figure of a deadly assassin.

“Quill, don’t be ridiculous,” Rocket said. “Get back into your pod! You can’t fit two people in there, you’re gonna die.”

“Why do you think I said if this goes wrong, you get the Milano?” Peter asked, taking off his mask to buddy-breathe for Gamora.

Rocket swore viciously and turned his pod as Quill took off his mask. He wasn’t going to make it, and Rocket didn’t want to see another… not friend, companion? Fellow test-subject? Whatever, he didn’t want to see Quill kick it, was all. He headed back down to Knowhere.

“Blasted idiot,” he muttered. “They’re all idiots!”

**Who is being an idiot and why?** Groot asked.

“Gamora lost the Orb to her crazy sister, and Quill just got himself dead trying to keep her alive a little longer in space,” Rocket explained. He rounded on Drax, currently covered in sticky, stinky yellow goo from a vat. “None of this ever would have happened if you didn’t try to single-handedly take on a frickin’ army!”

“You’re right,” Drax said. “I was a fool. All the anger, all the rage, was just to cover my loss.”

**We understand loss**, Groot told him. Rocket felt a surge of petty possessiveness run through him. He’d just gotten to the point of thinking maybe Quill could somehow fit into the messy box of Things What Rocket Cares About, and now he was dead, because Drax couldn’t let his own dead lie.

“Oh, boo-hoo-hoo,” Rocket mocked. “My wife and child are dead, guess I’ll fuck everyone over for it.”

**Rocket! How could you be so mean?**

“Oh, I don’t care if it’s mean! Everybody’s got dead people! That’s no excuse to get everybody else dead along the way.” Rocket scrubbed at his face, trying to prevent the welling up of saline in his eyes. It wasn’t crying, blast it, he just didn’t like his fur wet. “Come on, Groot. Ronan has the stone. The only chance we got is to get to the other side of the universe as fast as we can and maybe, just maybe, we’ll be able to live full lives before that whack-job ever gets there.”

**I’m not going, Quill was trying to save Gamora, he had a plan. We should see if he succeeded, and if so, save them.**

“Save them?” Rocket asked, curious. It would seem impossible, no matter how fast Quill’s plan
worked, he was probably still a nerve-burned popsicle. But Groot had this strange talent at being right. “How?”

**He called the Ravagers. I heard him. So we go get our friends back from Yondu.** Groot smiled. **I liked having friends for once. Let’s get them back.**

“I know they’re the only friends that we ever had,” Rocket said, sighing. It sucked being the friend with impulse control. “But if they lived, there’s an army of Ravagers around them, and only two of us.”

“Three,” Drax said and for a moment Rocket could see his whole life ahead, a constant string of Drax and Groot and Quill and Gamora wanting to **do the right thing**, and him unable to say no.

He grunted in anger and frustration, and turned to take his energy out on the ground

“Argh! You and your morals! You’re making me beat up grass!”

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“Quill?” Gamora was asking him something. “What happened?”

Hopefully nothing involving booze, he thought and reached down the link. He got back a jolt of energy to the brain, firing up oxygen deprived neurons. “Well, I saw you out there. I don’t know what came over me, but I just couldn’t let you die. I found something inside of myself. Something incredibly…” He saw her face, eyes far too close to the nasty emotional barrier she wasn’t ready to cross. “...heroic. I mean, not to brag, but objectively…”

Gamora sighed, and rolled her eyes in a way that might be fond. Peter accorded himself a mental back-pat, and sat up.

“Where’s the orb?” she asked, stretching her arms carefully.

“It…” Peter trailed off realizing Nebula had basically looted Gamora’s corpse. “They got the orb.”

“What?” she gasped, dropping half a shade lighter. The paleness moved from her cheeks out, he noticed, unlike the usual down from the hair or in from the jaw. He was trying to figure out how to comfort her with the knowledge her sister had done that when the door opened and what seemed like half the crew came in.

“Welcome home, Peter,” Kraglin said gravely.

“Hi, Kraglin. Can you show Gamora the med bay while I get the crap kicked out of me by Yondu? She doesn’t need to see that.”

“I assure you I’ve seen worse,” Gamora said dryly.

“And you didn’t need to see that, either,” Peter shot back. “Please, Krags?”

Kraglin nodded and offered Gamora a hand. Yondu moved to flank him and hauled Peter up by his coat collar, like a little kid. From there, it was a quick frog-march to a private-ish side room. They both knew Peter wasn’t up to walking to Yondu’s quarters. Peter laid everything out as best he could, the risk to Sandra, the choice to do all the work to earn all the pay. Meeting Gamora, what Darcy said about the fight with her, Rocket and Groot, the Kyln, Drax, and then the Collector.

“So let me get this straight,” Yondu said “You betrayed me, stole my contract, picked a fight with
someone way out of your league, got arrested, nearly died several times, and then didn’t close the deal?”

“Yondu, it’s an Infinity Stone, and according to everything I’ve ever heard of them, they are bad news. I don’t want someone like him holding on to it. Especially since Thor says he already had one, it’s way bad mojo to have two in one place.”

“I know that, Boy.” Yondu sighed. “I really don’t want one on my ship too long and I don’t know who else to sell it to.”

“Well, no worries there, it’s not on the Eclector,” Peter said with a wry shrug. “Ronan took it. He’s gonna use it to wipe out Xandar.”

“And what do you want to do ‘bout that?” Yondu asked. His voice had that cruel sneer the crew would expect in a dressing down, but his eyes had the encouraging sparkle to them that Peter knew was Yondu hoping Peter would loophole his way out of trouble.

“We have to warn them, obviously. Billions of people will die if he goes through with it, and probably billions more in the panic that comes after a Deathstar-level attack.” Peter sighed and put his elbows on his knees and looked up through his lashes at the closest thing he had to a father. “I think this is my thing, Yondu. I have to do this. I know I failed the Trials because I couldn’t save Gamora without you, but I’m willing to do what it takes to get to Xandar and help them hold the line. With or without you.”

“You want a hearing,” Yondu said, and Peter firmed his core to keep the waiver of fear out of his voice.

“Yeah,” Peter sighed. “I want a hearing.”

“You know that can go real bad for you,” Yondu said.

“I don’t have a choice.”

“Boy, ain’t I taught you nothin’?” Yondu groaned. “You always got a choice, that’s what being a Ravager is. Choices.”

“Then I choose the risk it’ll go bad for me, Yondu,” Peter snapped, standing up and raising his voice by pushing air from low in his chest, the way Steve taught him. “I want a hearing.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Full vouch: The dying word of a Ravager to ensure acceptance onto a crew for the people he gives it to.
Buddy-breathe: the technique of using one oxygen mask for two people. Usually in scuba diving.
Kick it: die.
Frog-march: being walked forcefully from one place to another, usually a sign of being arrested or held prisoner.
Deathstar-level attack: an attack using a planet killer, a Star Wars reference.
Notes:
Being unprotected in space is super dangerous and without a certain amount of non-human DNA, Peter couldn't live through what he does. He's still operating on the assumptions of pure human DNA, so he's preparing for what happens if he dies. That includes giving Rocket and Groot what family he has to give, and permission to keep his home (as long as they let the person who loves her most do the repairs).

In canon, Rocket stays long enough to see Peter and Gamora taken by Yondu, and he acts like he knows they're alive. In this story, Rocket knows enough about purely human biology to make the smart assumption that Peter will die a horrible, cell freezing, blood-boiling, nerve-ending destroying death within seconds of taking off his mask. He also actually cares about Peter and Gamora and understandably doesn't want to watch them die.

Groot, being plant-life, has a different way of processing emotion, so he's still able to feel sympathy with Drax, even though people he genuinely considers friends may be dead because of what Drax did. Rocket is using a much more meat-brain way of processing, which is to lash out when he's hurting and Drax looks like a viable target. Also, Groot was grounded and thus was fighting beside Drax, whereas Rocket was flying wingman for Peter and Gamora, so their current attachments are slightly different.

Peter isn't dead, that doesn't mean his body isn't sincerely regretting his life choices. Fortunately, his genetics and his connection to Sandra mean he can bounce back faster, and his understanding of the care and keeping of traumatized killers means he knows when to crack a joke.

Peter, Yondu, and Kraglin all know that Peter isn't going to be physically hurt by Yondu, because they all know the Yondad side of him exists. The less reputable members of the crew need the fiction of the hardass Captain who beats his men when they really badly fuck up, and with failing the one chance he had to prove his actions with the orb were acceptable, Peter has really, badly, fucked up. Hence Kraglin taking the person who isn't in on the lie away from where she might reveal it.

The death of Xandar would kill the planet's population, something similar to Earth's, so about 8 billion. However, any terrorist attack has a second wave of death, when panicking people stampede away from the source of terror. In space, trying to flee a planet killer would have different death causes, but I'd assume nobody would stay put to die or file neatly and orderly out of the targeted area, because sentient people tend to be hot messes when they're scared.

Hearings are another part of my headcanon for Ravager culture. They represent a chance to explain yourself to your crewmates, and get them to vote in your favor. The risk there is that your fate is then 100% in the crew's hands. Yondu can't protect Peter in a hearing, in fact, he has to act like a prosecutor. That's a big risk, but that'd be why Peter was worth Sandra saving him.

Teaser:
I knew he’d make it because when a Human’s back is to the cliff, they jump and build wings on the way down.
Gamora growled as she watched Yondu push Peter into a ring of Ravagers. She didn’t know why she had to witness this barbaric spectacle of punishment, but her guide, Kraglin, had said it was important to Peter that she be there. As loathe as she would be to admit it, she felt some soft emotion towards him that she was hesitant to name. It was something kind, maybe akin to friendship.

“Peter Quill!” Yondu barked. “You stand accused and guilty on your own admission of stealing a Ravager score. You got any final arguments why I shouldn’t have just fed you to the crew when we picked you up?”

Peter smiled, and Gamora felt her heart squeeze. He had a plan, she could see it in his eyes.

“If you kill me now, you are saying goodbye to the biggest score you, or any of the crew, have ever seen.”

“‘The Stone?” Yondu sneered. “I hope you got something better than that. Because ain’t nobody stealing from Ronan. It’s a fool’s errand for glory and units what you can’t spend when you’re dead.”

“For anybody else, sure, it would be. Not for us, and wouldn’t you like to be Captain of the crew that stole something right out from under that nutcase’s nose?”

The crew rumbled, divided on glory or common sense.

“It’s possible,” he told them. “We got a ringer.”

“Is that right?” Yondu asked, his voice cold. Peter locked eyes with Gamora and she understood what Kraglin had meant. She wasn’t there to comfort him in his pain, she was there because she was a part of the mad plan he had. She moved toward him one step, just edging out from the crowd.

“Meet Gamora. Raised by the most vicious, bloodthirsty bastard in the Universe, a man who breaks
gods. Trained in martial arts, she fights like she breathes, and most importantly right now, a recently former employee of Ronan himself. She knows everything there is to know about Ronan. His ships, his army.”

Gamora stepped forward, clearing the line between watcher and participant. “He’s vulnerable right now, he’s over confident and my Father will have withdrawn support after what was sure to have been reported as my death.”

“Hey, what do you say, Yondu, huh? Me and you, taking down a mark side-by-side, like the old days.”

The crowd’s mutterings shifted, and Yondu smiled. “I vote we let him go! You always did have a scrote, boy. That’s why I kept you on as a young’un.”

Then a blast shook the ship.

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Rocket had to hand it to Groot, when he was right, he was right. It felt good to blast the Ravager mothership with a scan-bolt. And what would you know, both Peter and Gamora’s life signs were on board, and full capacity.

“You are one lucky weed,” he told his friend.

I’m not lucky, I just know an odds bender when I see one, Groot replied. My people’s scientists hated Humans, they do this thing with probability. I knew he’d make it because when a Human’s back is to the cliff, they jump and build wings on the way down.

“Whatever,” Rocket snarked. “It worked. Hand me the com set?”

Unfortunately, the Milano wasn’t outfitted for someone topping in at three feet. Fortunately, Groot was accustomed to figuring out how to be Rocket’s height for him.

“Attention, idiots,” Rocket said into the receiver as Groot pushed a virus they’d loaded into the scan-bolt further into the comms system. “The lunatic on top of this craft is holding a Hadron Enforcer.”

Rocket flipped a switch to bring up exterior scans of Drax aiming a very large gun at the Eclector. He nodded at Groot, and the image went over the subspace comms to show on any screen the virus could claim.

“It’s a weapon of my own design,” Rocket explained proudly and pressed a button to signal Drax in his suit. He waited until the image shifted and Drax was clearly powering up the charge on the Enforcer. “If you don’t hand over our companions right now, he’s gonna tear your ship a new one.”

That’s a colloquialism, Groot reminded him. And I do not have control of their translator systems.

“So unless you want a second, very big, bay door installed under your feet, I’d suggest sending Peter Quill and Gamora back to us.”

The image showed Drax had the Enforcer fully charged. Rocket hovered a finger over the signal button.

“I’m giving you a down-count of five. Five, four, three…”
“Rocket, hold your fire!” screamed a voice on the comms. “Hold your fire, it’s me, for God’s sake! We figured it out! We’re fine!”

Rocket sagged back onto the chair. Anticlimactic, but probably safer for the space-time continuum anyway not to fire the Enforcer directly at a jump-capable ship he didn’t know. The wrong particles hit the jump-engine and suddenly quantum mechanics go wonky.

“Oh, hey, Quill,” he replied as Groot patched through to Drax on the visual interface to tell him to come inside. “What’s going on?”

The plan wasn’t exactly fool-proof, Peter would admit, but it was a lot more than what they had before, and Rocket wasn’t exactly being helpful.

“It’s got a reasonable chance,” Peter said again. “We ran the numbers.”

“You said that before,” Rocket said, voice nearing shrill with frustration. “And like before I want to know who “we” is. Because I don’t trust this crew to know odds from ends!”

Peter sighed. Rocket wasn’t going to budge, and Sandra had been pretty clear. The plan had an 85% chance of keeping Xandar intact with all of them. It had only a 12% chance of giving them reasonable time for an evacuation if any of the team left. There was no chance at all if Rocket took Groot with him. He pressed the privacy buttons on the wall to prevent spying and sat, looking Rocket in the eyes.

“It’s not a member of this crew,” he said, waving at the wall. “It’s someone from Terra. She’s a genius, and I trust her math with my life. I trust her math with Gamora’s life, and that’s actually more severe, because I know several people who will make my life long and very, very unpleasant if I don’t properly introduce her to them.”

“When did you call Terra?” Rocket scoffed, and Peter gave up, closing his eyes and popping just far enough into the mindspace to shout over the link

“Sandra, can you send Darcy over to yell at the local wildlife?” he asked the empty room, hoping his request would make it across the galaxy. Sometimes he really envied Darcy and Bucky and Steve for being able to really talk over their link. “I’m not making headway.”

Sandra showed up, her mental image fading in like an old TV hologram. Or the transporter from Star Trek.

“Darcy says we aren’t allowed to yell at Rocket, and you’re not supposed to call people names. That’s mean, and we agreed, no being mean to anyone not currently trying to kill us,” Sandra said reprovingly. “But I can come explain the numbers.”

“Fair enough,” Peter sighed. “Give me a sec to introduce you.”

He blinked and saw Rocket backing warily away. “Okay, here’s the deal, I’ll let you talk to my Terran source, but you do not yell at her, you do not call her names, and if you make her feel bad about being different I will kill you, skin you, and wear you like a hat. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure Quill, whatever you say…” Rocket was acting strange and Peter cocked his head.

“Are you okay? I was kidding about the hat thing. Mostly kidding. Sandra is like a sister, I’m protective, but I probably wouldn’t wear the remains of a sentient being. I’m a Ravager, not a
Reaver."

“You did the thing again. Where your scent changes. You always do something stupid, crazy, or damage-inducing after that.”

“Huh?” Peter looked to Groot, Gamora and Drax.

“Sandra is female,” Gamora pointed out. “Many species have sex-dependent scent markers.”

“Sandra is a teenage geek,” Peter pointed out. “She’s not the one responsible for… oh. Darcy and Jillian are responsible for that. Yeah, uh, don’t worry, Rocket. I’m not bringing out the scary people.”

“Quill, you are the scary people,” Rocket told him. Peter laughed and stepped back into his brain.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Ringer: a person who is highly proficient at a particular skill, brought in to supplement a team effort.
Mark: the target of thieves or con-men.
Scrote: a slang term for bravery or ambition.
Scan-bolt: an energy weapon that allows access to a ship's computers and life-signs monitoring.
Reaver: the bloodthirsty cannibals from Firefly, known for wearing human skin.

Notes:
For clarification, Yondu, Peter, and Kraglin are all aware this hearing is entirely Peter's choice and that while it's risky, Yondu isn't the threat. Everyone else, including Gamora, believe that Yondu wants to string Peter up by his thumbs.

In this, Peter knows Thanos was responsible for mind-controlling Loki, and thus will bring it up to give Gamora street-cred. Gamora has yet to realize that one of her father's victims is brother to Darcy.

The 'jump and build wings on the way down' line is from Ray Bradbury, borrowed with my deep respect.

Hadrons are subatomic particles studied by making heavy elements go really fast. Fast enough that special relativity kicks in. The Eclector has the ability to make hyperspace jumps, which would by nature involve messing with quantum mechanics and general relativity. So far, science can cope with very big (GR), very fast (SR), or very small (QM). There are field theories to cover big and fast, and small and fast, and if they have jump drives, big and small. Trying to do all three at once... might break physics. Hence Hadron Enforcer being the VERY extreme option.

Darcy uses very simple rules of etiquette, namely if it's not currently trying to kill you, don't make it think killing you is a good idea. This includes not doing unto others what would make you contemplate murder if done to you. That's why Sandra's list of what
we don't do to Rocket is so similar to Peter's list of what we don't do to Sandra.

Raccoons used to be made into fur hats in America during the colonial and pioneer eras. While I do not feel like getting into the ethics of the fur trade, Peter does know wearing Rocket's pelt would be really, really wrong, because he's sapient and therefore that would be murder and gross.

Teaser:

“I know you’re both crazy. But he’s crazy with a good chance of helping me kill Thanos. I cannot live like that anymore.”
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

Families are offered.
Families are accepted.
Families are tested.
The Battle of Xandar begins.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To ValkyriePhoenix, quadrad, Beth_Mac, SionnachOiche3, Wynni, Notashamed, ClockWeasel, Shadows_of_Shemai, Joey99, roguewords, and Selene_Aduial.

Chapter specific content warnings: This chapter and the next cover the actual battle with Ronan. Many emotional and mental owies are poked and much trauma is looked at. The insides of the Guardians heads are perpetual content warnings. Be aware of headspace.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sandra liked Rocket. He was cute and fluffy and he talked like Cousin Bucky. She liked Cousin Bucky, he was her math buddy. And Rocket had been okay with her request to move back to Peter’s room so she had something he knew around her. He got it.

“So, anyway, that’s the basics of the statistical analysis that says we can do this,” she explained, pointing to the tablet where she’d run some of the longer equations. “But that’s not the reason I think you’ll stay.”

“Oh yeah?” Rocket asked, poking at the numbers like they’d change if he scowled hard enough. “What’s that?”

“I think you’ll stay because I plan on bribing you,” she said. Rocket looked up sharply, and Sandra smiled at him. She’d stopped trying to do Cousin Darcy and Cousin Natasha’s scary smiles. She wasn’t good at them, her face was too round, and Peter just looked stupid with them. Maybe after the baby fat was finally gone, she’d learn them.

“With what?” he asked, and on his pared-down form, she could clearly see the angled lines of suspicion and worry. Also, his fur helped highlight the parts she needed to read faces. “Kid, Quill’s broke.”

“He is, but I’m not,” she said. “My account is separate and has half his take on all the hauls where I cracked safes or ran the zipwires. I don’t tend to shop much, so I’ve got a pretty big chunk. But that’s a moot point. I’m not bribing you in money.”

“That’s usually how bribes work,” Rocket pointed out.
“If you hadn’t noticed,” she said, waving at Peter’s body, “I’m not a ‘usually’ kind of girl. I want to bribe you with a family.”

“What!” Rocket screeched. “What gives you the idea I need that? A bunch of useless babies hanging on me all the time, a mate I can’t kick out after I’m done paying… why do you think I want that? Besides, I’m not what the things I came from are. Not anymore. I’m a mutation, a monstrosity.”

“So?” she asked, cocking her head. “That’s not what I meant. I meant, I don’t think you’ve had enough people who would always be there for you, always support you no matter how hard life gets. I don’t think anyone’s ever offered to get your gym teacher fired, and frankly everyone needs someone who would be willing to get their gym teacher fired. Everyone needs someone who would risk everything if they really needed it. Who can you turn to right now who would break every known law of man and nature to help you?”

“Groot’s good enough,” Rocket said, shifting.

“Groot can come too,” she said with a shrug. “Darcy says Cousin Zoe wants to meet him anyway. She’s been messing around with plant communication and she thinks she and Tony can make a hearing aid that will let her hear him talk, even though since he’s made of wood, he couldn’t talk like we do. But Darcy and Bucky and Nat are all…”

“All what?”

“I don’t know,” Sandra sighed. “It’s emotions, I don’t do those well. But I know it has to do with feeling like science experiments, and I think being your family would help them. I know it’d help you. And I think you know that too.”

Rocket picked up the tablet again. “Can you go over the part where we crash into the Dark Astor again? I want to double check the math on stress tolerances, so we don’t go splat like bugs on a window.”

Sandra smiled and pulled up the specs on the Milano from Peter’s bunk console. Darcy would be proud of this, and more family was always good.

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Peter stood at the helm of the Eclector beside Yondu. He’d given out the assignments, and everyone was on their way to start preparing. He’d sent a message to Corpsman Dey, and now he just had to hope the man would choose to help him.

“I’m not sure I can do this, Yondu,” he said in a small, quiet voice.

“No good Captain is sure,” Yondu said. “Bein’ sure of anything is the first sign you’ve done somethin’ stupid, Boy.”

“I don’t know, you always look pretty confident,” Peter countered.

“That’d be this little thing called ‘acting’,” Yondu said with a wink. “Go see to your crew, you’ll need them settled in their hearts a’fore you take them into a death trap like this one.”

Peter nodded and went to check on the team. Rocket and Groot were going over gear, with Rocket holding half a conversation. Rocket startled when he asked if they were doing alright.

“You’re crazy, this plan is crazy, and we’re all going to die,” Rocket said. “But I ain’t got a long
lifespan anyways, and I like the idea of going out with a gun in my hand.”

“I am Groot,” Groot said solemnly.

“That too,” Rocket agreed.

“You are an honorable man, Quill,” Drax said from behind him. “I will be proud to fight beside you. And in the end, see my wife and daughter again.”

“This is a lot of fatalism, guys,” Peter said, shaking his head. “I get that from Rocket, but please tell me at least one person here doesn’t think I’d willingly lead them to certain death. I mean, I’m leading you to likely death, but we know how to handle that. We’re losers. I mean, like, folks who have lost stuff. And we have, all of us. Our homes, our families, any kind of normal lives. And, usually, life takes more than it gives, but not today. Today, it’s given us something. It has given us a chance.”

“To do what?” Drax asked.

“To give a shit. To, for once, not run away.” Peter looked around the cabin at his people, his crew. He couldn’t force them, that would betray everything that Yondu and Steve had taught him about leading. But he could give them an example. “I for one, am not gonna stand by and watch as Ronan wipes out billions of innocent lives.”

“I have lived most my life surrounded by my enemies, Quill,” Gamora said, offering a knife to Drax. “I would be grateful to die among my friends. Whenever that may happen.”

“Oh come on Gamora! I did my best to come up with a plan that could work! I know I’m a screw-up, but I’m not that bad at motivational speaking. I’m not Steve or Darcy, but I’m not bad at it.”

“She means she is with us until she dies,” Drax said, placing a meaty hand on Peter’s shoulder as he holstered the offered knife along his shin. “As do I. We do not know what waits for us on the battlefield, but we know we will go there. We do not know when we will die, but we will do so as friends, as companions.”

“I am Groot.”

“What Groot said,” Rocket said firmly, reaching out to snag a ration bar from Drax’s pocket. “You all happy? We’re all standing up now. Bunch of jackasses, standing in a circle, talking about our feelings or whatever.”

Peter blinked, and suddenly realized they were standing in a circle now, Rocket raised to an almost equal height by a crate of grenades. Gamora squeezed Drax’s shoulder, and Groot laid a tendril arm across Peter’s shoulders. He shook with the sheer weight of the thing they were building, and wondered if Darcy ever got the urge to scream and rock in a corner until the pressure went away.

Probably not.

“Okay, let’s go save the galaxy.”

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Nebula retreated into the familiar paces of planetary destruction to escape the uncomfortable feelings Gamora’s betrayal had brought. Not that she blamed her sister for running from Thanos, but it was foolish to think she’d escape, and selfish not to have included Nebula in her plans. Her death was a mercy, nothing more and nothing less.
The lies did not sit well.

Rearing their heads in the lull before the attack were the niggling thoughts that Gamora’s companion had stirred up. Who could love someone like her, cut apart and reassembled so many times? She was like that old philosopher’s riddle, if you have a ship and you replace the engine, and then you replace the hull, and so on until each part has been replaced, is it the same ship? She thought she was the same, as much as anyone is after growing up, but she could never be sure. And what did he mean, someone like her? Did he mean a monstrous amalgam of weapon and woman, or simply a killer? What family produces someone like her and yet can talk of love and regret and redemption so sincerely? And did she want redemption?

The truths sat worse than the lies.

Nebula had to admit in her heart, mechanized though it may be, that she did want redemption. She wanted love and family and forgiveness for the things she did in service to Thanos, the things she prepared to do in service to Ronan. She craved that love casually promised in the voice of an angry, hurting man on her com-link. It was as hunger, driving her slowly mad with a need she could not fulfil.

Perhaps that is why she hesitated as she saw the incoming ships. Ravager make, like his. Likely him, or his people, come for vengeance. She understood, and delayed the order to intercept by precious seconds. A failure she could hide, yet a rebellion she could savor. She raised the shields a moment too late as she alerted Ronan. A few seconds bought them only optimism to shatter later, but it was what she could do.

“All pilots, dive! They’re beneath us!” she ordered in a roar when she could wait no longer to direct the counterattack. The Ravagers had opened fire and her console was lit up with warnings. “Forward thrust, now!”

“The starboard kern has been breached,” she said, turning to Ronan. “We have been boarded!”

“Continue our approach,” Ronan ordered, voice calm and impassive. She’d known he was dangerous when she agreed to help him in exchange for revenge, but this wasn’t the voice of simply a dangerous man. It was the voice of a broken, insane one. Avoiding him, she looked back to the screens in front of her. Xandarian ships were forming a wall, and the boarding party was moving toward...

“The Nova Corps have engaged,” she informed him. She did not mention the ghost walking among the boarders like a shade of Death. That was a private pain.

“None of that will matter once we reach the surface.”

Nebula saw something sickly familiar in his eyes, the same mad gleam of her Father. A tiny whispered gasp of negation, not even voiced before she released it, escaped her lips. She had escaped one madman to serve another. She was not willing to go down that road again. Turning to the guards, she barked out orders to cover her own fear.

She was going to go meet her sister, for good or ill.

She came upon them as the grey one was insulting her sister. Nebula smiled, Gamora had always liked her friends rough at the edges. It was why they’d gotten along so well. She stepped out from a niche and stood threateningly in their path.

“Oh little Gamora, look at what you have done. You have always been weak,” she said with a
smile. “But you were never this stupid befor-”

A blast of energy caught her midsection, sending her flying at a wall.

“Nobody talks to my friends like that,” said the one who had moments before been insulting Gamora. Nebula shook her head as she initiated the self-repair of her mechanical parts.

“He said to the flight deck. I’ll shut down the power to the security doors,” Gamora said, glancing down at Nebula. They left and Nebula pulled herself upright. “Nebula, please.”

“He said family forgives,” Nebula said quickly, before Gamora could finish her. “Was he right?”

“Who?” Gamora shook her head, that hair Nebula had always loved bouncing like she was a child again. “Peter?”

“He said he knew someone who loved someone like me,” Nebula gasped out. She didn’t think she could do this.

“I know,” Gamora said, reaching her arms out and down, a submission, a plea for peace. Always before in their lives, a sign of weakness, and Gamora was always the strongest sister. “He wants me to meet her too. Well, in person.”

“What?”

“Peter Quill is a very strange man, even for a Terran,” Gamora said with a shrug like that explained anything. “Sister, help us fight Ronan. You know he’s crazy.”

Nebula rolled her eyes. “I know you’re both crazy. But he’s crazy with a good chance of helping me kill Thanos. I cannot live like that anymore.”

“You don’t have to,” Gamora promised. Nebula flinched from her empty words. “We can be together, sisters, like we were supposed to be from the start. There are ways to start over, to… to clean the ledger of all the red. It’s been done before.”

“No,” Nebula said firmly, shaking her head. “I can’t. I’m not ready to forgive you Gamora. You were the one who shattered our sisterhood, and you have to live with that red until I say so. Strike me down if you must, but I’m not forgiving you that easily.”

Gamora nodded, sad and understanding. “I really am sorry,” she said, and ran for a powerlink. Nebula let her go, and turned to find a ship to get off this doomed rock. There would be other days for revenge, for killing… for redemption.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Zipwires: a device like a zip-line, Sandra ran them because putting them up between buildings uses trig.
Monstrosity: a monster, or in this case, an evolutionary leap, no longer compatible with the source species.

Notes:
Rocket’s views of family is a disaster-zone of problems and triggers, hence him saying
what he does. He does want what Darcy and Co will call "Family", but the label is awkward. Also, I find it hard to believe there are no sex-workers in space, so he does reference using their services, but please be aware he so would not use a badly-run or abusive brothel, he's patron to some very lovely self-employed ladies instead who don't at all remind him of caged animals.

So in this, Peter actually has his plan (more than the 12% of a plan) well before Rocket, Groot, and Drax arrive, so the timing is off for the inspirational speech gone wrong, but he still says it, as it needs to be said.

The idea of being the adultier adult gives Peter the screaming heebie-jeebies. That's normal, since he cares about these people and they're headed into danger.

Peter's guilt trip is beginning to pay off in Nebula, but she's still a product of her upbringing, and escaping that is difficult. Her rebellion take the form of imperfect service and strongly wavering loyalty, which at this juncture is all anyone can ask.

Drax's line before Nebula's involves implying Gamora is a prostitute. I dislike that line, as he's canonically SUPER literal, and Gamora obviously is not a sex-worker of any kind. However, I assume he still would still have that rough humor, and insult her somehow. Gamora finds it funny, and Nebula knows that.

Nebula is signalling a willingness to defect in her choice of insults, since they are completely opposite the truth of their history. Gamora was always the stronger of the two, as per GotG2.

Gamora and Nebula will need lots of time and work to mend their relationships, and mistakes were made on both sides. But, they are both willing to put in that effort, so there's a really good chance they can.

Teaser:

“Think fast Genocide Smurf!”
Chapter 71

Chapter Summary

Dance off bro, me and you.

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter hardened his mind into blunt instrument. The violence wasn’t unusual to him, most of the time it didn’t bother him until after a fight, when he realized how unbothered he was by it. This time… wasn’t much different, actually. He thought later would actually be easier, since this time he knew exactly what he was fighting for. Although that also freaked him out before he shut down his feelings for the fight. The stakes were high this time, more than money or respect from the crew, the stakes this time were billions of innocent lives.

He couldn’t think about failure though, he couldn’t let it break him, so he shut it down, and guided his people. He faced Korath, the Kree dickwad who’d tried to grab him on Morag, and this time he didn’t ask for help. Well, not from Darcy or Bucky. Instead, Drax shouldered his way in between them and carved out a chunk of Kree neck.

“Finger to the throat means death,” Drax said in Korath’s face, as the man went limp. “That’s a metaphor.”

“Yeah, sort of,” Peter said, wanting to encourage his friend’s exploration of language, but unable to feel more than light disgust at the blood spray and that weary determination that hits in the middle of long flights, and apparently, long fights. Suddenly more of Ronan’s crew came barrelling out of a hallway. “Oh, no.”

Groot whirled into action, skewering a bunch of the goons on his arm, drastically extended to form a thick vine of wood. After the first sickening sounds of wet crunches and snaps, Groot whipped the new appendage into the ones he hadn’t impaled, beating them to death with their fellows. Peter paled as he recalled Groot holding up a Kyln inmate by the nostrils, and pictured the follow through that could have happened. That was a disturbing idea, even in his deadened emotional state, so he pushed it aside.

Groot turned to them and smiled. That was, frankly, more disturbing.

“Good job,” Peter said as firmly as he could. Gamora jogged up beside him, flushed from whatever fight she’d had to get to the power to the doors.

“What are you waiting for? Let’s go,” she said.
As they ducked into the largest room through the partially open security doors, Peter could see Ronan monologuing. He remembered at least one rant from Darcy about the idiocy of villains who monologue, and the familiar feel of the pragmatism Bucky and Steve countered it with.

“Xandar, you stand accused. Your wretched peace treaty will not save you now. It is the tinder on which you burn!”

“Think fast Genocide Smurf!” Peter called, and blasted Ronan in the gut with the Hadron Enforcer. Ronan fell, and sick, bruise-colored energy spread from his hammer along the floor towards the viewscreen. It was the Infinity Stone.

“Rocket, evac any remaining Nova Corps pilots!” Peter screamed into his com.

“Hold on,” Rocket yelled, his voice hitting the reverb that happened when two com-lines that weren’t linked were open at once. “Break away Saal, just…”

The sound that came next made everyone flinch. Drax laid a hand on Peter’s shoulder as he choked some strangled sound free of his throat.

“Was he a friend?” Gamora asked gently.

“No, uh. I barely knew him…” Peter blinked back tears as he listened to Rocket turn his com off for a moment of privacy. “He was a dick the only times I went past him during an arrest.”

“He died well,” Drax said, and then stiffened, as a crackling scraping sound drew their attention to Ronan, where he was standing up.

“I was mistaken, I do remember your family,” Ronan taunted. “Their screams were pitiful. I…” Nobody heard what he was about to say next, because 20 pounds of very angry cybernetically modified scavenger piloted the Milano through the viewscreen and ran him over. Groot gathered Rocket up, and Drax clapped Peter on the shoulder and Gamora lightly touched his hand as the ship began to fall.

“Well, guys, we tried,” Peter said, looking out at the rapidly approaching surface of Xandar. He couldn’t help but feel a bitter sense of rightness, falling to his death in a ship meant to bring mass death. Maybe he and Steve weren’t so different after all. The light grew dim and he turned to look at Groot, who’d grown some kind of nest, shielding them.

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Rocket was still burning inside from the needless, pointless, stupid death of a man who, despite having a steel girder up his ass, had followed his orders with only mild complaining. The pain was like a living thing, something that had been there, but sleeping, until Saal went down in a burst of purple flame. Now, they were falling to their deaths, with only the cold comfort of taking Ronan with them. Groot tried to comfort him, but Rocket wasn’t there yet.

“Well guys, we tried,” Quill said, his voice distant and bleak. Rocket looked over to where Gamora was pulling Quill more firmly into their circle. It was awful and wrong on some level he couldn’t name, seeing Quill so empty of hope and snark and bad jokes.

**I will keep us safe.**

“No, Groot!” Rocket snapped as the nest formed. “You can’t, you’ll die.”

**I will die either way.**
“Why are you doing this?” Rocket screamed, half sobbing as he watched his oldest friend push all his life force into growing a wooden bounce-cage. “Why?”

**Because you will live, and you will have a family. I want you to be happy Rocket, I want Peter and Gamora and Drax to be happy. We are more than friends now, we are a family.**

“ We are Groot” he said, pushing his voice to the edge, the sharp cracks of splintering vocal planks only heard by Rocket.

**Remember me, and be happy.**

Rocket struggled with that idea. A world without Groot, and him still, somehow, happy. It didn’t fit, and he tried to see some glimpse of what Groot was thinking in the light of the glowing pollen.

The ship crashed.

Groot shattered.

The scream set Rocket’s fur on end.

“I called him an idiot,” Rocket said, looking at the twigs that had been his best friend. Drax sat beside him and carefully brushed the fur from his brow back towards his ears. Rocket keened, painfully aware that nobody but Groot could hear that pitch. It was their secret, their shared voice.

Drax stiffened, and Rocket followed his gaze to Ronan, emerging from the wreck. “You killed Groot!”

He sprung to his feet, ready to charge the asshole who got Groot killed. He wasn’t even reaching for a gun, he wanted to do this the old way, with claw and tooth and anger. The force of the rage pushed him to jump, even as the hammer came at him, and he twisted painfully to avoid the evil purple glow, landing badly on his back several feet to the left of his intended target.

“Behold!” Ronan crowed. “Your Guardians of the Galaxy! What fruit have they wrought? Only that my father and his father shall finally know vengeance. People of Xandar, the time has come to rejoice and renounce your paltry gods! Your salvation is at hand.”

<^>

Gamora was on her feet and reaching for a weapon before Rocket was knocked out of the air. That, that fiend had brought too much death, and she was going to stop him, but the power building off the hammer made her skin crawl. She was gritting her teeth to attack when suddenly…

“Ooh-oo child, things are gonna get easier. Ooh-oo child, things’ll get brighter.”

Peter was… singing? He looked Ronan in the eye, clearly unafraid. “Listen to these words.”

He started dancing as he continued to sing, greatly confusing Gamora.

“What are you doing?” Ronan demanded. Gamora would be lying if she said she didn’t also want to know, but so far Peter’s insanity had worked out, and she was also sort of curious how far he could take it.

“Dance-off, bro. Me and you,” Peter said, holding his chin high in challenge. As he continued to move in a strange, rhythmic dance, Gamora could see Drax helping Rocket to stand and recover their absurdly large weapon. Breaking her focus, Peter held a hand out to her. “Gamora. Show the man how an assassin dances.”
She hesitated, ready to shake her head in refusal. Something in his eyes, a hope, was flickering. She smiled. “Not today.”

“Subtle, but fair. I’ll take it back,” he said, pulling his arm in.

“What are you doing?” Ronan demanded.

“I’m distracting you, you big turd blossom,” Peter shot back. Rocket and Drax had the gun at full capacity, and blasted the warhammer into its constituent atoms.

The stone fell.

Peter dove for it as Ronan did.

“No!”

Pale Terran fingers closed around livid purple.

The scream ripped free of her throat unbidden.

Purple veins spread along his skin.

Winds picked up, tossing dirt and debris and twigs she knew were the remains of a team-mate around in an unholy cyclone of power.

Gamora recalled the pictures on Knowhere.

She silently hoped Nebula could forgive a ghost.

“Peter! Take my hand!” She set her feet and pushed, trying to overcome the power pushing against her. She felt a big, meaty hand at her back, preventing her from sliding back as she reached to the purple-eyed being that was slowly replacing their friend.

“Take my hand!” she demanded again, and with a jerky, uncoordinated movement, he did. The warmth of the stone flooded her hand, and she felt rather than saw Drax grab Peter’s other arm. Rocket joined the chain, still clutching a bit of Groot. On a sudden impulse, Gamora reached over and closed the circuit, grasping the twig.

“We’re standing in a circle,” Rocket said fuzzily. Somehow she heard him over the roar of the storm inside her. She felt the pain of his transformation, how the jagged bits echoed her own without matching or exceeding them.

“A bunch of jackasses,” she gasped, giddy on the power flowing through her. She thought briefly this was what her Father had wanted, then dismissed the idea. He wanted the dark inverse of this life-sharing power.

“Standing in a circle,” Drax said, nodding. They were one in ways she’d never dreamed of. She knew every inch of Drax’s abilities, his rage, his sadness.

“Talking about our feelings, or whatever” Peter agreed. She saw a spacious room, beautiful art, a wall of tools, and a family. Two dark-haired women had their arms around a blonde girl, and two men, one with a metal arm, were smiling at her. Behind them stood a red-haired woman, a muscular blonde, and a slender black-haired man she recognised.

“Hey,” the shorter of the two dark-haired women said. “Don’t you have a job to do? Save the galaxy first, then come for family time.”
The world flexed, and the four of them were standing in a line, in the eye of a storm, staring down Ronan.

“You’re mortal!” he wailed. It was strange how pathetic he seemed with the power they’d unlocked in themselves. “How?”

“You said it yourself, bitch,” Peter retorted, a reverb of each of their voices under his own. Gamora grinned ferally, knowing what he’d say next. “We’re the Guardians of the Galaxy.”

Together with the power of the Stone they destroyed Ronan. The fingers were Peter’s, but the choice was shared, the power was equally divided. Drax’s grief, Rocket’s anger, Peter’s stubbornness, and her own triumphant glee each filled the ropes of power that snaked out across the space between them and drove through Ronan’s blackened heart. He cracked apart and Gamora wished for a second to keep going. To burn everyone who’d ever hurt them. To burn Halfworld to cinders, to kill her Father. Thanos, burned alive by the very power he sought. The idea was pleasure so intense it was pain. She knew then.

This was how planets burned.

This was how stars were ripped apart.

This was how the end began.

With a scream, Gamora forced her arm to lift against the will of the Stone, using Drax’s disproportionate strength. Her containment orb snapped open, ready to use thanks to her own preparations. She bared her teeth, borrowing Rocket’s ability to fight through pain. She hesitated, then Peter shoved a strong wave of his own suicidal determination to do the right thing. To make his family proud. She took his love for them and slammed the orb down around the Stone, before dropping to her knees.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Smurf: blue-skinned garden gnome-like beings from a cartoon of the same name whose names all had "smurf" in them.
Bounce-cage: a structure designed to cushion impacts, like the Egg Drop Challenge containers.
Vocal planks: Groot's version of vocal cords.

Notes:
Peter uses combat dissociation to protect his mind from the trauma of battle. Not everyone can do this on command, and even fewer can turn their emotions back on again afterwards, so if it reads creepy, that's why.

Darcy has Opinions about what makes a quality villain, and a large enough sample size that she's qualified to judge. Bucky and Steve are on team "don't look a gift idiot in the mouth" and don't so much care if the bad guys are inept.

Peter's shock of grief for Saal's death is more based in empathy for Rocket and knowing that Rocket will not handle this death well. Rocket on the other hand is suffering from survivor guilt, combined with losing a person under his command for the first time.
Groot sees the equation as his death or everyone (including him) dying. Rocket sees the equation as Rocket-Groot=unhappy. Neither is wrong, but both are failing to reach the other's way of seeing.

There's a gap in narration between the forming of the bounce-cage and the scene on the ground, because everyone who could be a POV was out of it due to crash landing. Apologies if that was too abrupt.

Rocket is NOT hit by the Infinity Stone-modded warhammer, even if he looked like he was in the movie, because that implies raccoons have unholy durability beyond what I'm willing to contemplate.

In the movie, there's a moment when Peter has the stone and his eyes look purple, which is echoed in the second Guardians movie when Peter is using Celestial power. So basically high power-levels always make Peter cross into looking more like the alien half of his biology.

Gamora recognizes Loki from when he was held by Thanos, but she's not ready to face that idea yet. The other people are, in the order mentioned: Jillian, Darcy, Sandra, Bucky, Steve, Jean, and Thor.

Teaser:

“Quill! We require units to buy a little pot!” Drax called, and Peter broke out laughing.
“Yeah, you’re right. That’s family.”
Chapter 72

Chapter Summary

Recovering is its own form of heroism, as are apologies.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Tsita, quadrad, Wynni, SionnachOiche3, Joey99, Zyrieen, Notashamed, QueenOfTheQuill, Beth_Mac, Shadows_of_Shemai, ValkyriePhoenix, Maedae84, Selene_Aduial, and hhhellcat.

I'm currently trying to navigate finals, the holidays, and a choice of transition methods in this story, so while I'm not on official hiatus, I would like to ask for patience around the next chapter. There's also a question for all of you in the end-notes where a teaser usually is, please give me any feedback you have on it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Yondu felt the breath catch in his throat when the storm of energy calmed down. He staggered off the battlefield as Peter helped the woman looking to be a good first mate to her feet.

“Well, well, well. Quite the light show,” he chuckled, trying to hide his relief. A good 40% of him wanted to go hug Peter and maybe order him confined to bunk for the next decade, but the other 60 was very aware the deadly rock was swiftly becoming the focus of his crew’s desire. None of them were that good at risk assessment, or they wouldn’t have been following him. “Ain’t this sweet. But you got some business to attend to before all the nookie-nookie starts.”

“Peter, you can’t,” she said, pretty clearly not grasping what was actually being said. Or a much better actress than he pegged her for. “Peter.”

“You gotta reconsider this, Yondu,” Peter said, more for the crew’s benefit than Yondu’s. “I don’t know who you’re selling this to, but the only way the universe can survive is if you give it to the Nova Corps. Or someone like the Nova Corps who isn’t really badly understaffed, but still. Good guys only.”

“I may be as pretty as an angel, but I sure as hell ain’t one,” Yondu informed Peter. He rolled his shoulders in the signal long worked out to mean sleight of hand. “Hand it over, son.”

With a great show of reluctance, Peter pressed the metal of the orb to Yondu. The weight balance was off. Yondu smiled and held it aloft. The crew cheered.

“Yondu?” Peter called as they began to pack up to leave. “Do not open that orb. You know that, right? You’ve seen what it does to people. Please trust me when I say no one person can ever hold it’s power. Four people couldn’t, and that’s counting me. You know my opinion of myself, but even my ego has to admit that is too dangerous.”
“You worried ‘bout me Quill?” Yondu asked, feeling a bit choked up over Peter’s concern, even if it was for show.

“Lil bit,” Peter admitted, then he paused lost in thought. “Oh, but… I do have one idea where you could safely offload it. Kartograf Holdings. Good turn around.”

“You sure?” Yondu asked softly. Peter didn’t often bring up the shell account Sandi used.

“I hear they’re consolidating,” Peter said with an air of sadness. Well, if the story was right, he might not be seeing the little one much any more, so that made sense. Yondu nodded and clapped Peter’s arm. He was a good kid.

“Yeah, Quill turned out okay,” Kraglin said as they boarded. “It’s probably good we didn’t deliver him to his dad like we was hired to do.”

“Yeah, that guy was a jackass,” Yondu agreed. “Time to head out. Peter’s passed the second try at a Trial by my count.”

“I wonder if anyone’s going to notice I switched out the orb on him,” Peter mused, and Gamora barked out a startled laugh.

“I was sure he was gonna kill you, Peter,” she said, glad to voice the relief she’d felt since that strange hearing.

“Oh, I know it looks that way,” Peter told her with a smile. “But he wouldn’t. Yondu is about the only family I have outside of my own head.”

“No. He isn’t,” she corrected, gesturing to where Drax and Rocket were hunched over the twig of Groot, deep in discussion.

“Quill! We require units to buy a little pot!” Drax called, and Peter broke out laughing.

“Yeah, you’re right. That’s family.”

It was a whirlwind that she didn’t fully track, helping to begin repairs on Xandar. Peter pulled out some ridiculously specific knowledge of post-disaster logistics, and she wasn’t sure he was always him, simply given the amount of time he spent awake. She helped relocate families at his suggestion, and discovered that small children tended not to fear her. Their parents cast wary looks at her, but the children themselves happily pestered her for clapping games and kisses on their scraped knees. She expected the same would befall Rocket, but most children seemed to have the good sense to avoid the cranky bounty hunter as he coaxed the twig of his friend to grow. Now, the adolescents, they liked him, offering to run small errands to catch a chance to say they’d spoken to him.

Soon, the help they could offer was outweighed by the discomfort they all felt in the restored calm of Xandar’s cities. Nova Prime invited them to Nova Corps headquarters to express her gratitude, and see them off. When they got there, Corpsman Dey pulled Peter aside. She didn’t resist when he linked his hand with hers for support as they confessed to having some anomalous medical data on Peter.

“Why would you even know this?” he asked, clearly afraid and concerned.

Rhomann had the good grace to look abashed. Gamora liked Rhomann, he was… sweet, in a way she hadn’t thought she’d ever get to know, and it set him apart from the other corpsmen. “When we
arrested you, we noticed an anomaly in your nervous system, so we had it checked out.”

“So.. what? I’m not Terran?”

“You are half Terran,” Nova Prime corrected. “Your mother was of Earth. Your father, well, he’s something very ancient we’ve never seen here before.”

“That could be why you were able to hold the stone for as long as you did,” Gamora lied, hoping to buy Peter some time to process. She of all people knew a father was a complex topic, one not to be poked at in front of outsiders.

Fortunately, Drax and Rocket chose that moment to join them, with Rocket holding a pot with a tiny version of Groot planted in it. Gamora had to admit she held a soft spot for the little plant. It was too soon to tell if the cutting was going to become an entirely new being, a child of the Groot who saved them, or a rebirth of the old one, but he was still adorable.

“On behalf of the Nova Corps, we’d like to express our profound gratitude for your help in saving Xandar,” Nova Prime said, then gestured to Dey. “If you will follow Denarian Dey, he has something to show you.”

They thanked her, and stepped outside at Dey’s guidance.

“Promotion?” she asked the now-Denarian. Rhomann blushed.

“Karmen is very proud,” he said. “I’m still getting used to it.”

“The pride of your wife is a good thing,” Drax said firmly.

“Your wife and child shall be proud and rest well knowing that you have avenged them,” Gamora told him. They’d come a long way from when he was mindlessly set on revenge.

“Yes,” Drax agreed. “Of course, Ronan was only a puppet. It’s really Thanos I need to kill.”

Maybe not.

It didn’t matter. She’d still fight by his side.

“We tried to keep it as close to the original as possible,” Dey said as he pointed to a vision beyond anything Peter had hoped for. “We salvaged as much as we could, although we had to get some new parts for some of the Terran adaptations.”


“I have a family who are alive because of you. Karmen would never forgive me if I sent you back out in less than the best.” Dey shifted, facing the others. “Your criminal records have also been expunged, in light of your service to Xandar. However, I have to warn you against breaking any laws in the future.”

“Question,” Rocket said, and Peter stifled a smile, knowing what came next would be Rocket’s typical teasing, because Dey was a friend. “What if I see something that I want to take, and it belongs to someone else?”

“Well you will be arrested.”
“But what if I want it more than the person who has it?”

“Still illegal.”

“That doesn’t follow. No, I want it *more*, sir. Do you understand?” Rocket asked with an abnormal level of formality that sat strangely on him. Gamora chuckled. “What are you laughing at? Why? I can’t have a discussion with this gentleman?”

Dey broke into a grin as he got it.

“What if someone does something irksome,” Drax mused thoughtfully, “and I decide to remove his spine?”

“That’s…” Dey broke off, seeming to know his place in the joke. “That’s actually murder. It’s one of the worst crimes of all, so also illegal.”

“They’ll be fine, Dey,” Peter reassured the man. A joke could go too far, after all, and he wanted to keep at least one member of Nova Corps on their side. “I’m gonna keep an eye on ‘em.”

“You?” Dey looked skeptical.

“Yeah, me.” Peter snorted. “I’m not the best hero, but I’m about the only one of us with relatives who don’t try to kill me. If anyone can keep this family together and reasonably sane, it’s me.”

“Good luck,” Dey said dryly. Peter rolled his eyes and whistled to get everyone focused.

“Load ‘er up, gang, it’s time to blow this popsicle stand! Drax, file that as slang for leaving.”

“Thank you, Peter Quill,” Drax said, double checking the docking clamps were loose.

“Gamora, I need a hand reaching the nav stabilizers,” Rocket called from inside. “Oh, wait, they installed a ladder, nevermind.”

Peter smiled. It was good to have family.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Nookie-nookie: Kissing, cuddling, or sex.
Lil bit: a small amount, also Peter's nickname for Sandra.
Kartograf Holdings: the shell company for holding and investing Sandra's share of the profits from jobs.
Pot: can mean a small container for plants, can also refer to marijuana.
Denarian: a rank in Nova Corps, above Dey's former rank of Corpsman.

Notes:
Yondu probably understands that Peter isn't trying to get Gamora into his bed, but there's a certain rough facade he has to keep up around the crew.

Gamora isn't a good actress, she's just very accustomed to rough father-figures being willing to kill their kids. At any rate, Yondu's not correcting her, since it helps his game.
The orb Peter hands over has a Troll Doll in it, which does not weigh the same as the Stone, nor is it shaped the same, hence the balance being off.

Since Sandra's connection to Peter is likely to fade out after he finishes his destined action, which currently seems to be saving Xandar, her money becomes a lot less necessary to hold onto until Peter gets her her own M-ship. She's given the go-ahead for Yondu to take out a chunk he can convince the crew was a payday from the sale, and Yondu won't have to tell them about the switch.

It's entirely unintentional that Drax requests to borrow money in a way that forms this pun, but I could not resist, especially as the stereotype of a cousin/brother asking for weed money is one that Peter would know from his pop culture exploration with Darcy.

Small children see Gamora as "Safe" because she's obviously on their side and just as obviously able to take out threats. Teens prefer Rocket, because he's got the rough edge that marks him as an outsider, and thus cool.

Gamora calls Rohmann "Corpsman Dey" at first because she hadn't heard of his promotion yet and doesn't know the uniform changes.

Testing someone's DNA without their permission is Super-Duper squicky on an ethical level, which Peter knows well because of Darcy and Bucky being big on medical ethics. Rhomann knew it was wrong when they did it, but did not have sufficient rank to object, and did want to make sure Peter was okay. He's already been scolded by Karmen, and now that he's a Denarian, pulled enough rank to get the information handed over.

Gamora knows Peter was able to hold the stone for as long as he did because of the Link, but she also knows they don't talk about that outside the family.

Peter has adopted a few habits from the Earth Crew for helping with time-displacement, and is using them for Drax's linguistic quirks.

Dey realized they'd messed up by de-personing Rocket in the booking process (see the line "Calls itself Rocket" and repeated use of subject number rather than name) and wanted to make a concrete apology. Thus the Milano 2.0 has adaptive features for a raccoon crewmate, including ladders, special seats to allow for tail-room, and a bunch of redundant environmental controls where he can easily reach them.

Here ends Guardians Vol 1. The timeline has Guardians Vol. 2 happening a few months later. I can either go right to that with a time-jump next chapter, or I can divert back to Earth for a few chapters and swing back by Peter and Co. later. Which one do you want? Stay on-story, or get back to our Avenger faves? Vote in the comments!
Chapter 73

Chapter Summary

How the Battle of Xandar looked from Earth, and other family moments.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Tsita, Wynni, SionnachOiche3, Snowecat, MaeDae84, Lesa, Crystallea1321, Melissa, ValkyriePhoenix, biblioworm, Beth_Mac, Beacuzz, Joey99, Shadows_of_Shemai, Thecheshirehatter, QueenOfTheQuill, KillerLaurel, Laurel_Wolford, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, ClockWeasel, hhhellcat, Selene_Aduial, and Lady_Layla!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

On Earth, the attack on Xandar happened a little more quietly. Before the M-Ships launched their assault, Sandra settled into half-lotus, and everyone else prepared to listen to her narration and obey her orders to tap in if necessary. They didn’t think it would be, Peter was actually a good fighter, but if it did become necessary, they wanted to be ready.

Sandra didn’t try to force her way in beside Peter, that had yet to work when they tried it, instead the link acted like all the links in recorded history save Darcy and her men. Instead, she laid a mental hand on the great cable that stretched between her mind and Peter’s and let the impressions flow like vibrations on a guitar string.

Peter was scared, of failure, and of success. The price of failure was innocent lives. The price of success was change, and the loss of their connection. She sent what reassurance she could that the bonds don’t usually snap, just fade. They had time to say goodbye. Then Peter was numb, cold, moving like a shark through bloodied water. Sandra shivered and took Cousin Natasha’s hand. Fights felt wrong and scary when looked at this way.

Peter felt grief, loss, anger and pain. Then he felt shock, and resignation. Then hope, mixed with sadness and a sick feeling like guilt blended with relief. Sandra bit her lip and reached for Cousin Steve. Steve held her as she cried the tears Peter wasn’t letting himself have.

“It’s okay to cry,” he said into her hair. “It’s okay to hurt when you lose a soldier.”

“How do you know that’s what’s happening,” she asked through hiccups.

“Not my first ball game, kiddo,” he said warmly. “And you’re leaning pretty hard on the door Jean put in my head. Survivor guilt feels like that.”

A harsh shock of rage-pain-fear-hate surged through her.

“He didn’t die,” she said darkly. “Ronan, he didn’t die, and someone good did.”
“What do we do about that?” asked Cousin Bucky, teacher-voice turned cold.

“We fix it,” Sandra replied and gathered her own emotions, her exhaustion and fear and stress and anger, and placed it on the cable. Then she pushed. Peter received it, she could feel it when he stood to face the threat. She heard the song he was choosing, and began to hum along with him. Cousin Darcy whipped out an iPod and the song surrounded her. Things will get better, she decided. Starting with winning this fight.

Then, there was blinding light.

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Darcy blinked as they suddenly fell into the mindspace. Aunt Jillian called for help, and she went to help get Sandi to stand as purple light leached away the colors and substance of the mental room.

“We have to work quickly,” Jean said. “This thing is eating my power reserves down to the limit.”

“Borrow from me, Lady Grey,” Loki said, holding out a hand. Thor batted at the tendrils of light away from them as Steve’s art collection was erased.

“I can replace it,” Steve said quickly, yanking Bucky back from the gallery space. “I can’t replace you.”

“What in the…” someone said, and the alien team was standing in the mindspace with the rest of them. She smiled at Gamora and saw Sandi give Rocket a little wave.

“Hey, don’t you have a job to do?” Darcy asked them. Loki was blowing his breath out in a slow but labored pattern, audibly working at shoring up Jean. She wanted to have time to hug the assassin and fuss over Peter’s eating habits, but they were on a time limit. “Save the galaxy first, then come for family time.”

They nodded and winked out of the room, leaving behind a purple-tinted window into the eye of a storm. Darcy waited with her heart in her throat as they destroyed their enemy with a quip and a suitable amount of brutal ruthlessness. That power was tempting, seductive… evil. She let out a shuddering breath as Gamora slammed the cage for it shut and they all bounced back into their own bodies.

“Okay, so you’ve saved the world,” she said to Sandi. “Not this one, but a world certainly. You want ice cream and pizza?”

“How… how do you go back to life after that?” Sandi asked her, tears welling up. “It was so huge, and I was so important, and now… I go back to school?”

“You can transfer to Xavier’s if you like,” Jean offered as she used the tissues Loki offered her to blot the spot of blood from under her nose. “You are a mutant, although I don’t think minor precognition about events on other planets requires safety training. You might like the flexible study plans, though. We have students from middle school to college, and some who have to take classes in about that same range, thanks to educational gaps.”

“I’ll think about it,” Sandi said. “I’d get to hang out with Cousin Zoe, right? She goes there?”

“Yes, and I teach there,” Jean told her. Then it was the two of them talking school plans, and Darcy smiled bemusedly as she realized she’d been forgotten.

“Nothin’ like family, eh, guys?” she asked her husbands. Steve smiled and shook his head, but
“I like our family,” Nat said from her ungraceful sprawl on Bucky’s lap. “But I want to go home and see my archer now. I miss him, and the rest of our family.”

“Agreed,” Steve said. “I want to get a proper breakfast bagel, too. Assembling superhero teams is one thing, assembling your own bagels and lox is quite another.”

“We should call Coulson,” Bucky added. “SHIELD leadership at least should know we have friendlies in spaceships, so they can tackle the people with launch codes when Peter shows up. I don’t want to have to bail you out when you murder someone for threatening your son.”

“He’s not my son,” Darcy said quickly.

“Pull the other one, Doll, you were on the phone with Tony’s decorator last week prepping his room for him. It’s okay, I’m glad you got a boy after all I gave you were girls.”

“Let me rephrase,” Darcy said slowly. “Peter has a really strong Mom-figure in his memories, and I don’t want to upset him by moving in on that turf. So while, yes, I plan on taking full material and legal responsibility for him and his reintegration on Earth, I won’t call him my son until he says it’s okay, or the ghost of Meredith Quill arrives to inform me I should.”

“Sister,” Thor called from the doorway of the den. “Loki is departing now. He wants to get back to the Embassy and send a message home that there is another Infinity Stone which needs to be secured.”

“I’ll be right there to say goodbye,” she called back. “Steve, you call Coulson, Natasha, you arrange for our plane, and Bucky…” He caught her gesturing hand in his, the cool metal startling her senses and slowing her brain back down.

“I’m packing,” he said, kissing her fingers. “Don’t overthink it, love. We’re going home, not storming the castle.”

“Do you think they’ll make it?” Natasha asked in a whisper.

“It’ll take a miracle,” Steve replied solemnly.

“It’s not my fault all my logistics training is for squadron-sized groups,” Darcy grumbled, glaring at the two wise-asses. “Actually, it’s basically Steve’s fault.”

“Hey!”

“Don’t quote Miracle Max at me without a reasonable chance for me to respond,” she retorted, sticking her tongue out.

“Okay, detki, let’s get moving,” Bucky sighed. “Off you go to talk to your brothers, Doll.”

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The New York contingent decamped slowly, first Thor left with Loki to do a few things at the Embassy he’d been putting off, and Jean hitched a ride up to Westchester with them. Then Clint came and collected Nat, who left a flight plan behind and a little moleskine booklet of codes and numbers to call in emergencies for Sandra. Jillian vanished sometime in that chaos, and soon it was just the Lees and the Barnes-Lewis-Rogers triad.
“Okay, what’s the current crisis?” Bucky asked Sandra as she poked his cheek to wake him from a nap.

“Plumbing,” she sighed. “Peter wants to know the best way to fix a pipe junction that’s been smashed with falling plane bits.”

“Okay, let me get the note paper.”

He explained the trick of physics that let you use the damage to seal pipes while you got the main lines turned off, and the angles of leverage to pop the debris free. His notes weren’t strictly necessary, but he felt more like he was actually helping if he drew out the calculations. Additionally, he was starting to notice that Sandra and Peter were going non-stop when everyone else needed sleep. He wasn’t sure if that was youth, or the Stone’s influence, but it helped them keep going during the messy and unpleasant process of disaster recovery, so he didn’t ask questions.

“Make sure you have a distribution system for bottled water,” he added. “The water will be off in people’s homes for a few days at least, and life needs water. When we did the repairs in London we paid stores who stocked water bottles to keep track of who was buying how much, and took supplies from the aid packages to the people who seemed to need it most. Community organizations are good for that too, if they’ve got some kind of Scouts. Use teens as runners, there’s always plenty who want to see the wreckage and they might as well be useful.”

“Got it,” Sandra said, her eyes going unfocused as she relayed information. “Thanks Bucky!”

“Yeah, of course,” he sighed as she left. When did kids get so fast?

The repair questions slowed, and finally stopped. Sandra hadn’t said the swaps were over now, but the subdued look that had come over her made Bucky think they finally had. Stretching it even as long as they had was probably just a side-effect of the Stone’s power, since not everyone would end up like he and Steve and Darcy had. The day of their flight arrived, and frankly Bucky wasn’t too upset to be finally leaving. He liked the Lees, and he’d thought what they did for Peter was the right thing, but Broxton Oklahoma wasn’t New York City, and home is where he wanted to be.

Thor met them on the tarmac with a handful of files.

“These are what my brother calls ‘light dossiers’ on the men we sent to provide security for the Stone,” he said, skeptically eyeing the inch-thick stack. “Methinks perhaps he is a bit over-prepared, but he was rather concerned by the being who was seeking the power of the Infinity Stones.”

“Ronan?” Bucky asked as Darcy took the files and Steve hefted their bags to take them to the car that was waiting. “He’s really dead though. We saw that.”


Understanding hit Bucky like a train. Ouch. “Okay, yeah, he’s coping with some hyper-vigilance, but until Atlas Shrugged is toast, I don’t think that’s automatically a bad thing. I’ll call Ciara.”

“We don’t need anything blown up?” Darcy half-said half-asked.

“No, we need Strike Team Chartreuse to go beat up Loki’s symptoms,” Bucky explained. “Which means clearing it through Ciara, since Strike Team Chartreuse are both technically underage. Seeing as how they’re six.”

“Ah, good plan my man,” Darcy agreed, bouncing up on her toes to kiss Bucky’s cheek before
taking the files and stuffing them in her oversized Travel Purse.

Bucky guided them to the car as Darcy chatted using her seemingly endless store of tension-energy, called Ciara to sic the Twins on their favorite godling, and then got them up to the common room, although Jarvis had more to do with the success of that endeavor. Once his duties were complete, he flopped down on the ridiculously comfy and heinously sturdy couch Tony supplied the common room with, and attacked the throw pillow with his face. “I need a vacation after that vacation,” he muttered, and his loves laughed, but they tossed a blanket on him, so he forgave them.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Half lotus: a yoga pose useful in meditation.
Friendlies: people on your side.
Detki: children.

Notes:
This chapter overlaps with the last three chapters, so we backed up a little bit time-wise.

"Not my first my ball game" is a metaphor for having done or seen something before. Steve has lost soldiers before, lost friends, and he knows how badly it hurts, and how important it is to pick up and keep going.

Considering the last two bouts of alien ships to appear in Earth-space were evil and trying to conquer the planet, SHIELD has an understandable trigger-itchiness about spacecrafts. However, Darcy just invited people in spacecrafts to come by for movie night, so SHIELD needs to be warned not to shoot first and ask later.

Some quotes from Princess Bride are too good to pass up.

Thanos' codename in Darcy-speak is Mad Hatter, because Loki could say Mad, but not finish to Titan due to a mix of trauma and reasonable concern Thanos could spy on him if the wrong name was used. Darcy is not as worried about the second one however, and is longing for a chance to black his oversized eye.

Atlas was a Greek Titan who was made to hold up the sky after the God-Titan War. Atlas Shrugged is a novel by Ayn Rand, a spectacularly depressing story that makes out regulations as evil and corporate heads in a liberal-strangled future as desperate victims fighting off "looters" wanting to steal their productivity. Basically none of it would jive well to anyone with Bucky and Steve's background, and as such using this as a new nickname is a MASSIVE BURN against Thanos. The Brooklyn Boys are not here for authoritarianism, fascism, objectivism or oligarchic capitalism.

Strike Team Chartreuse are the Harrow Twins.
“He said no. It’s not always smart to poke the angry, grieving person with animalistic abilities. Trust me on that. That is how you get raccoon turds in your bunk. Or worse, the barbarian’s.”
Chapter 74

Chapter Summary

Life may be more normal right now, but that doesn't mean it's any less interesting.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Joey99, ValkyriePhoenix, Snowecat, Tsita, Wynni, quadrad, Shadows_of_Shemai, Readertee, SionnachOiche3, Selene_Aduial, hhhellcat, Laurel_Wolford, Beth_Mac, and roguewords!

Friendly reminder, next chapter we see the Guardians again and enter the lands of "Canon, what's that?"

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After a few days of rest and Tony hovering by her with offers of juice and soup, Darcy drafted a few of Stark Industries Intern Squad to carry out her orders and retreated back into the living areas of the tower. She wasn’t actually getting sick, but she was so exhausted from their galactic adventure (that Tony knew about and the board members who were technically her superiors didn’t) that it made sense to prevent illness by limiting her germ pool.

“Okay, Tommy, you’ll be keeping Dr. Bell from operating heavy equipment until she passes out, you know she won’t take naps. Kathy, please remove all of Otto’s food stashes, he needs to see sunlight sometime soon. John, up the protein content of the snacks in Riri’s lab, she’s got a new project with Tony, she needs real fuel, not sugary crap. Amber and Mike, tag team Johansen and make sure they get all the reports written up for the board. They’re at enough risk because HR hasn’t been purged of all the dicks and they requested a unisex bathroom, we don’t need them missing a supposedly critical form. Speaking of, Sequoia, Wendy, Meg, sweep the women’s restrooms for sleepers, Nathan, Andrew, Eric, you do the same for the men’s, Christine, Josh, Astin, you hit up the unisex and handicapped bathrooms.”

Her minions nodded briskly and broke off from the video call in the conference room she’d claimed as their lair to go complete their quests as she assigned them. When she was done, she was left with Amy and Athena, the hyper-capable duo who had started the intern-organizing process before it became one of Darcy’s official duties. “What do you want from us, Boss?” Athena asked.

“I need chocolate. Like, a crate of hershey. I’m going to be talking to the Embassy after this, and…”

“Your brother is the hottest of messes?” Amy finished. “We got you, Darcy. Go save the world, one misfit at a time.”

“I love you both,” Darcy sighed and ended the call. Time to call Loki.

The vid-call connected to a screensaver of the Asgardian Embassy seal, a knotwork pattern similar to
but different from the Bifrost scars, in gold over a blue background. Delicate music from a contralirone played at a soothing pace while she waited. Soon, the perky smile of Kaydee appeared on the screen, her wild strawberry-copper locks braided into a crown, and a neat linen suit polishing her appearance. “Hiya Your Highness!” she chirped. “Calling for Prince Loki?”

“Yup, thanks Kaydee,” Darcy said with a smile. Kaydee nodded and switched the screensaver to Darcy’s preferred photo-slides of the Nine Realms. Darcy sighed, glad they’d snapped the girl up when they had the chance. She made the Embassy run smoothly, even when everyone else was drowning in super-drama. It helped that her hyper-focus on celebrities gave her a near-encyclopedic knowledge of the preferences of everyone who interacted with the Embassy regularly. The image of a Vanir waterfall flickered and became the face of Loki, seeming tired and drawn. Even when they’d freed him from the Asgard dungeons he hadn’t looked so pale. “My dude, you need like, all the naps,” Darcy said without thinking. “When did you last eat?”

“Half an hour past,” Loki said drily. “You trained the staff well, Kaydee held my cellular phone hostage until I’d finished the roast chicken she brought me.”

“Good girl, I’ll put her down for a raise next review,” Darcy said smugly. “But if you’ve eaten, and I know you can’t sleep yet, the only thing left to do is go over the arrangements you made to secure things. The dossiers look fine, very talented people. I’m also glad you tossed a few people who know infrastructure in there, the locksmith was a good choice. Nova can’t be as strong as they once were, but that location is at least unlikely to be targeted immediately after such a blinding defeat.”

“My thoughts. Now, there was one other stone we had to contain, but it’s location is…”

“Mobile,” Darcy said, matching her brother’s grimace. “Carina is motivated to protect it, and the Aether is slightly less immediate doom than the others, but I dislike having it so isolated and moving. The transit is always the weakest part of the protection detail.”

“Exactly,” Loki sighed. “I did have one idea… it’s not something Father will approve of, though.”

“And since when have I cared what Papa Bear did or didn’t approve of?” Darcy asked. “Lay it on me, I’ll back a good play with Odin. He can’t fight all his kids at once.”

“Assign Sif to find her and guard her. She’s a skilled warrior, and two women travelling alone seem like less a threat than a battalion. It doesn’t draw one’s eye, yet it would also give the Aether a strong guardian.”

“Good plan,” Darcy said, nodding, “only one issue though; Sif hates getting assignments if she thinks it’s solely to get her out of court. I do not like the idea of someone disgruntled having access to the Aether. Jane said it’s pretty manipulative and I don’t think we need an Isildur situation as well as yet another Dork Lord trying to rule the universe.”

“Lady Jane also said it actively resisted being moved to someone attempting to use it for destruction alone,” Loki pointed out. “She seemed almost fond of it by the time we sent it to Tivan for safe-keeping. And Sif knows first-hand the danger it poses. I believe she will see it as a vital mission, one perhaps not as openly honorable as her usual choices, but one only she can do. If I ask her first, and then inform Odin of the plan, I think it has a good chance of success.”

“Awesome, get to it,” Darcy said. “Ciara is out that way with the boys, right? Have her on cookie-to-mouth duty when you tell him we’re assigning Sif out. And drink more of that tea Eir sends you for the nightmares. You need sleep, brother-mine.”

“As do you,” Loki said, with a pointed Look. “And a sandwich. I think you need a taste of your
own medicine, Sister-dear.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “I’ll order up some food. Jarvis will make sure I eat it, ask him to bug me if I don’t.”

That settled, she said goodbye and hung up. Before she could finish deciding what she wanted from the Tower’s in-house restaurant, though, Bucky and Steve arrived with two pizza boxes each. Her mouth watered as a plate of excessively topped pizza was handed to her.

They’d survive what came next.

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A few days after everything seemed to be back to normal, Steve answered a call on the landline Tony had installed in their apartment. Technically Jarvis was the best switchboard operator to exist since Rose Roberts, but Steve liked having at least one phone that would ring with an actual telephone sound. Tony laughed and called him a Luddite, but the phone went in and later Steve found a book slipped into their shelf on the practice of skeuomorphs, making new things artistically similar to old things.

“Hello, Barnes-Lewis-Rogers residence, Steve speaking,” he said. He hadn’t yet lost the phone habits of a time when the whole building shared one line and you weren’t always the one they were trying to call when you picked up.

“Hi Steve,” said a warm, familiar voice. “This is Ororo Munroe at Xavier’s School. I figured it was probably a yes, but we like to confirm when we can, it is alright with you if Zoe shares a room with the student you referred through Jean, yes?”

“Of course,” he said with a smile. “Sandra and Zoe are cousins, it’s alright with us if it’s alright with them. You got the art supplies I ordered, right? Jean said you’d been wanting a better studio.”

“Yes we got them. Piotr is about ready to propose to you over that, by the way. Kitty almost got jealous over how he reacted to the special pastels.”

“Oh, yeah,” Steve sighed. “Creme pastels are my favorites, I’m so glad Maya figured them out. She hasn’t gotten paint media to move yet, but I’m really impressed overall by her reverse engineering of Asgard’s art supplies.”

“I’ll let Piotr know,” Ororo laughed. “Actually, since we got the supplies, he’s been trying to move the art classroom to a bigger room, you wouldn’t happen to have some free time to come move easels and things? You could also make sure Zoe and Sandra are settled in, new students tend to get homesick, and it can lead to roommate quarrels....”

“Sounds like a plan,” Steve agreed. They discussed times, then hung up. He swung through Bucky’s miniature mechanic’s garage on the work-half of their floor to let him know, then texted Darcy’s main assistants. It wasn’t always smart to interrupt her at work, since her work was preventing other people’s work from exploding, but her trusted minions would know when she had a free second.

Steve packed, had dinner with his family, and hit the road upstate before night fully settled. He liked the quiet of the empty car and the peace of mostly-empty roads late at night. It also meant, due to his own unique sleep needs, he arrived in time to eat breakfast with the kids. Sandi had already formed a tight bond with Zoe, and Harley had positioned himself as the protective older brother, despite being nearly two years younger. They talked him into making pancakes beside Howlett, who was
still a little skittish about anything Steve might reveal about him.

“Go on,” Sandra said, pushing Steve into the kitchen. “He’s growly, but he does want to know. I’m not even good at emotions and I know that.”

“He’s just scared it’s bad,” Harley said, rolling his eyes. “He got called a monster a lot, so there’s bad tape. We’re doing our best to trash the junk code, but it would help to have factory specs available for him.”

“It’s Bruce and Loki all over again,” Zoe finished, rolling her eyes at the predictability of grown-up emotional problems with all the tired sass of a teen.

“Okay, fine, kids, I’ll go help cook,” Steve said, stepping inside. “Now go wash up, and offer to help set the table.”

“Kids demand you cook too?” Howlett asked, looking sort of incongruous with a white bar apron on and a smudge of flour on his cheek.

“They seem to think we need to vent about the War,” Steve admitted. “It’s cute, in a Parent Trap sort of way. Frankly, I’d just as soon forget the last time we spoke, it was right after Bucky…. I’m glad you don’t remember that. I was a mess.”

“Captain America, a mess?”

“Hey, you were the one who told me it was okay to grieve,” Steve retorted and dug a thing of buttermilk out of the fridge. “You also told me not to try to lie that Buck was like a brother.”

“Well, yeah, you two stink to high heaven of each other now, when you have showers. I don’t imagine you were much better then.”

“Yeah, and you said pretty firmly it wasn’t at all like your relationship with Victor, so ergo not brotherly.”

“...Victor?”

Steve froze, a batch of batter mid-stir. Bucky had gone through some bad patches while he recovered from the conditioning, but it hadn’t been like this. It hadn’t been that soft, aching, torturous question. Steve swallowed hard and put the mixing bowl down.

“Victor Creed. Your half-brother. Older. He had powers like you, only I heard his claws were more fingernail-like. I never met him, but you spoke fondly of him, to me anyway. Bucky said he made your life too complicated to consider adopting one of the kids we pulled from a camp, a metal-bender. I wish I could tell you more.”

“It’s okay,” Howlett sighed, and his body posture changed, clearly shifting to Logan, not Howlett. The change was startling. “It’s more than I had before. Chuck still won’t open boxes for me if I haven’t already found them, having a name helps me locate ‘em in my skull. Although I got a bad feeling I know him. Now, I mean. Look, I need a minute, mind taking the juice out to the dining room?”

“Take your time,” Steve said, grabbing the orange juice pitchers. One was clear plastic holding normal juice, the other was pink and held a vitamin and mineral fortified, extra calorie version for the mutants with metabolisms that needed more building blocks. Setting them down, he shot a disappointed look at his kids, who were waiting eagerly for the results of their meddling. “No.”
“No what?” Harley asked.

“No, I’m not telling you what happened. Privacy maintains.”

“But…”

Sandra slapped a hand over Harley’s face, half over his mouth and half in it. “He said no. It’s not always smart to poke the angry, grieving person with animalistic abilities. Trust me on that. That is how you get raccoon turds in your bunk. Or worse, the barbarian’s.”

But…

Sandra slapped a hand over Harley’s face, half over his mouth and half in it. “He said no. It’s not always smart to poke the angry, grieving person with animalistic abilities. Trust me on that. That is how you get raccoon turds in your bunk. Or worse, the barbarian’s.”

Bucky had waffled a bit in what to do with his modern life. Darcy, of course, had plans and preparations left over from the days before aliens, mostly scraps that she was now building into something more. Her job at Stark Industries and her role with the Embassy gave her enough outside world-saving that she was fine. Steve, on the other hand, had fully embraced the domestic side of life, cooking, cleaning, and keeping up with the kid’s lives. It was so very far from what would have been expected from him in their own time, yet it suited him. Bucky, on the other hand, didn’t feel the same satisfaction from homemaking that Steve could. He liked cooking, occasionally, and he loved spending time with Zoe and Harley, but he needed the feeling of recognition that came with a job. And he was just plain getting bored. Sadly, though, most mechanics weren’t hiring former brainwashed assassins in their 90s, and the odd job market looked like crap these days. And it wasn’t like his other skills transferred.

“Sergeant Barnes,” Jarvis interrupted his musings, “Agent Coulson has invited you to have coffee with him in the downstairs lounge. He seems to want to compare asset notes for some of his teams. Agent Graham appears to have found information on Miss Lee in Agent Romanov’s things and ‘has called dibs on the blonde Tony’ for Strike Team Theta.”

“I’ll be right down, Jarvis, please let him know,” Bucky said, grabbing a jacket and a ballcap from the wicker basket of exchangeable disguise gear by the door.

The downstairs lounge was tasteful and modern, done in shades of blue and organic shapes that Steve adored and Bucky thought looked like geometry had a baby with marine biology. But what mattered was that it was private. Nobody made a big deal of the famous people who went there, it was a good way to not be let back in, and the few non-SI employees who had been let in weren’t willing to jeopardize that invitation.

“Hi Phil,” he said, slipping into the booth perpendicular to Phil’s seat. Tony hadn’t ever said it was on purpose, but the layout of the lounge allowed for maximum locations to sit where your back was covered.

“Hi Bucky,” Phil returned with a smile. “Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I’m not usually one to snipe potential recruits, but I know Haley. If I don’t settle things now, it’s going to turn into a war with SciDiv. We can’t afford that, the Coffee Wars were bad enough and now that Hydra’s been forced into the open public opinion of S.H.I.E.L.D. is tenuous at best. We haven’t gotten to the disavowal point yet, but we can’t afford a lack of unity.”

“Well, for one thing, Sandra is fifteen, she’s not going to be recruitable for anything for three more years,” Bucky said firmly. “I know you’ve made exceptions in the past for recruitment ages, but I’m personally saying not with her. You don’t even approach her parents about it until she’s eighteen. If she wants college first, you listen.”

Okay, we can work with those terms,” Phil said, nodding. He flagged the server and grabbed two
cans of matcha from the tray. Bucky took one and waited. There was always something else when Phil folded that fast. “I really am impressed by how rapidly Sandra seemed to have progressed in her social skills from what Natasha said.”

“She’s a smart kid, she took to the information like ducks take to water,” Bucky said, popping the tab on the can. He had the same fondness Phil did for cold matcha, and it helped him remember that Phil wasn’t the bad guy. “We just gave her a different perspective on human interaction. Sometimes it’s not instinct, and it needs to be taught.”

“Which explains Natasha’s own… unique way of interacting,” Phil said softly, clearly working towards something. “You have quite the history with talented, dangerous young women, don’t you?”

“Don’t make this weird, man,” Bucky instructed. “I’ve raised daughters to be agents of shadowy government powers without losing some spark of light. Nothing more.”

“Would you like to guide a few more?” Phil asked.

Bucky blinked.

More?

What ‘more’ could there be? Surely SHIELD didn’t have their own Red Room operation.

“I’m technically the handler for Delta,” Phil continued, seeming unaware of Bucky’s internal confusion. “But in all practicality I’m the handler for Theta as well. Mainly because the Girls don’t tend to do well with other handlers. They make them cry, actually, and then come home with injuries and smug expressions. If I don’t step in, I’m afraid they’d get themselves killed.”

“Seriously?” Bucky asked. “Haley and Mina are such sensible sorts.”

“They willingly entered a sport where they perform multiple bodily contortions while being minimally supported on beams, poles or metal rings, or flying through the air after jumping on a spring trap,” Phil said drily. “Let’s call it non-standard risk assessment as a lifestyle.”

“This is fair,” Bucky said. “Why complain to me? I’m not a SHIELD agent, I’ve never worked for SHIELD.”

“Would you like to?” “Maybe, what’s the job like?”

“Tearing your hair out while people with worse self-preservation instincts than literal children disobey your every order as you try to set stuff up so they don’t actually die?” Phil offered, a pained smile on his face. “It’s not exactly the most fun you can have on the job.”

“It sounds like most of my childhood and all of my parenthood,” Bucky pointed out mildly.

“Which is why I’m asking if you want a job,” Phil returned, just as mild.

“Okay, sounds like a worthwhile thing.” Bucky sighed and pushed his metal hand through his hair. “Do I need to have my security clearance tested?”

“I took the liberty of having every Avenger’s security clearance looked at and approved,” Phil sighed. “Because I know if we try to tell you something is classified, you’ll just hack into the databases and steal it anyway. You’ll need to take the SHIELD version of the sidearm proficiency test, and fill out a small forest’s worth of paperwork before you can go undercover, but all the i’s
Bucky smiled. He could use his skills in this new life, just as much as his loves could. “I think this is the start of a beautiful partnership, Phil.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Isildur situation: a Lord of the Rings reference, meaning a good person tempted by a sentient tool of evil or destruction.
Dork Lord: a play on the phrase "dark lord" for a Major Big Bad in fantasy. Here meaning Thanos.
Bad tape: repetitive negative ideas about oneself, related to the Broken Record concept.
Junk code: computing term for code that doesn't do what it is supposed to, if anything.
Factory specs: factory specifications, i.e. the list of How This Should Be or How This Was (before getting broken).
Matcha: green tea.

Notes:
There's a goodly number of cameos in the scene with Darcy's Minions. To list the ones from Canon; Dr. Bell is Dr. Tempest Bell, a young, gifted scientist and the world's leading expert on astrobiology (she was hired to work with Jane on anything relating to aliens), Otto is Dr. Otto Octavius, the not-yet-insane man behind the villain Doc Ock (I have yet to determine if he'll go bad yet), and Riri is Riri Williams and yes, the new project with Tony is a result of having reverse engineered his stuff, if only in theory (Jarvis recruited her to a summer internship program he made up when he spotted her blog about Iron Man).

If you haven't already, I suggest reading ValkyriePhoenix's connected work, it much more fully explains the relationships of the Asgardian Royal Family, including why Ciara Harrow is going to stand by Odin and shove cookies in his mouth when he tries to complain.

Piotr Rasputin is the mutant known as Colossus, and he's an artist like Steve, so he's the one who is so happy about the new art supplies. He's dating Kitty Pryde, hence the jealousy.

The kids pushing Logan and Steve together reminds Steve of the movie The Parent Trap, where twins separated at birth team up to reunite their estranged parents.

Victor Creed, Logan's half brother, is also the villain Sabertooth. So yeah, that's not great news for Logan.

The downstairs lounge looks like this.

Strike Team Theta is made up of the girls from the movie Stick It, former Olympic gymnasts who staged a coup, led by now-agent Haley Graham, and got recruited by Clint. They feature in some of ValkyriePhoenix's works.
“So Yondu,” Rocket said slowly. “How much do you want Peter back? Because I have a plan, but you are not gonna like it.”
Chapter 75

Chapter Summary

The Guardians try to bring their families closer, with mixed results.

Chapter Notes


As a warning, here we enter the land of "Canon, what's that?" so keep your hands and feet inside the fic at all times, and buckle up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter was restless. He hadn't been swapping, Sandra had gone back to school and the connection was waning, as everyone said was normal. It still didn’t feel good. Half his family was conspicuously missing from his life.

“Hey, Gamora,” he said, leaning over the galley counter to look at the cockpit where the former assassin was on watch.

“No, Quill,” she replied.

“Aww, come on, you didn’t even wait to see what I was going to ask!”

“You want to go to Terra and wedge your family there and us into one,” she said, easily reading him without even looking. “Rocket is firm on not wanting to go to Terra until Groot is big enough to provide him reasonable support seeing it for the first time, and I am not yet ready to face Loki. I’m working on it, those books Darcy listed are very helpful, but I’m not ready, and Rocket’s not ready, and do you really want to see what happens when Drax informs Darcy who he wants most to kill?”

Peter thought, then nodded, even though Gamora still hadn’t turned to see him. “Fair, although I think they’ll get along like a house on fire. Or maybe they’d set a house on fire. It depends on where we set down and who owns the houses nearby.”

“And that’s why I don’t want to go to Terra without lots of preparation, and Groot back to help limit the crazy from our side. We should find a job to do instead. Is there anything on the ‘base?”

Peter pulled the galaxy-wide message board up on the console in the galley. The usual advertisements for thugs-for-hire, a few coded requests for thieves, and some bounties popped to the top. He shook his head and reset the board to the new algorithm that had yet to settle in. Aid pleas and requests for mediators floated up, as the darker work sorted itself down the list. Nothing looked too interesting, and it wasn’t like they were hurting for units anymore, especially since the Milano docked free in Xandar-controlled ports these days.
Suddenly, a message screen opened. Apparently, someone on Sovereign had a job, and believed they had payment that would appeal. He jabbed in the permissions to open a line and a golden woman with some kind of fancy hairdo answered.

“You’ve reached the Guardians of the Galaxy, what heroic need can we assist with today?” he asked pleasantly. She remained stone-faced.

“I am High-Priestess Ayesha, of Sovereign,” she announced. Peter briefly wished he could contact Darcy, but he and Sandra had agreed to let the link fade out as best they could, although they both slipped sometimes. As long as Darcy and Sandra’s Mom didn’t find out, that was okay. “We caught a thief trying to steal something quite precious.”

“And that is very proactive of you,” Peter said. “But leaves me wondering why you called us, if they’ve been caught. We’re not in the imprisonment or punishment games.”

“She claims you would wish to remove her from our planet, and would be willing to assist us in protecting the annulax batteries she attempted to steal in order to do so.”

“Let me guess,” Peter sighed. “The “she” in question would be a cyborg Luphomoid who answers to Nebula.”

“Indeed. She claims to be a sister to the female of your group.”

“Yeah, she is. Hang on one moment.” He put the call on silent and stepped away from the screen. “Gamora, Nebula wants help with bail, do I say yes or no?”

“Who arrested her?” Gamora asked, not moving from the pilot’s seat.

“High-Priestess of Sovereign.” The ship jerked faster than the inertial compensators or grav-system could handle and Peter flailed like William Shatner for a second while Gamora straightened out their flight path. “Okay, I’m saying that’s a yes?”

“Yes please. Sovereign likes to think of itself as the pinnacle of civilization and genetic perfection.”

“And thus is somewhere we leave nobody we care about,” Peter said, nodding. “Gotcha. Set our course, please.”

He confirmed details and sent over a contract to sign, then went to explain the job to Rocket and Drax.

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“Thank you for coming,” Nebula said icily. Gamora rolled her eyes as she settled her sister in the galley. “Aren’t you going to undo the chains?”

“No, because you ran away from me and took up interstellar crime last time I let you go,” Gamora informed her. “Are you hungry?”

“Give me that yaro root.”

“It’s not ripe,” Gamora said. Some things didn’t change, and her sister refusing to ask when she could demand, was apparently one of them. “I’ll make you some oatmeal.”

Nebula looked at her blankly.

Gamora sighed and pulled out the ingredients.
“It’s a comfort food from Peter’s homeworld. I like it, and I think you will too. It’s like bugoo but actually tasty.”

“Bugoo is disgusting, I want yaro root,” Nebula said petulantly.

“Yeah, well it’s cold and has animal fat in it. Oatmeal is warm and uses butterfats instead. You still like garra berries, right?”

Nebula snorted and turned away. Gamora couldn’t blame her, life without a family was hard. If she hadn’t had Peter and Rocket and Drax, she might easily be just as rude and brittle as her sister. So instead of pushing, or getting angry, she made the hot cereal. According to Peter, real Terran oats were better, but the flat grains they stocked made a decent substitute. He also said garra berries were similar to a Terran berry known for its blue shade, which is how he stumbled on the secret treat of Thanos’ children. The teal berries stored well, and the sweet-sour taste had marked every stolen moment of happiness Gamora had as a child. Now, she sprinkled them on the cooked grain, and topped the bowl with a squeeze of butterfat.

“Come on, you’ve been running, you need to eat.”

“I can’t eat, my hands are bound.” Of course Nebula would throw that back at her.

“If I take them off, will you give me your parole?” Nebula looked strangely at her. Gamora flushed as she realized she’d used a Ravager slang term. “Promise you won’t run away or try to kill any of my crewmates. I need to know you’ll let me try to earn some forgiveness.”

“You can try,” Nebula agreed.

As Gamora unlocked her hands, Peter ran in.

“We got a problem.”

“What’s that?”

“Sakkar and Yondu got in a fight on Contraxia, and now half of Yondu’s crew is in… a mood.”

“Why do you even work with this man?” Nebula asked. “A mood? That is no problem of yours.”

“Okay, maybe I should be more specific,” Peter said, glaring at Nebula. He still hadn’t quite forgiven her for trying to kill Gamora outside Knowhere. “Yondu Udonta, the man who raised me better than to flush you out an airlock, got in a fight with Stakar Ogord, the man who saved his life, in the middle of the Iron Lotus Brothel, and now half his crew is trying to mutiny. Everyone on this ship owes their continuing existence in the ranks of the living to Yondu, and he needs help. So we’re going to go help him.”

Nebula sneered.

“Eat your oatmeal,” Gamora ordered. “I’m going to go help my family. The family that still wants me. We’ll let you off the ship before we get into a space battle, but you’ve made it very hard to care about anything more than the minimum required humane treatment.”

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Rocket liked bar fights. They were simple, easy. There were no feelings in a bar fight, there were very few rules, and usually everyone stopped before actually killing. Bar fights were almost relaxing.
This bar fight was not relaxing.

“GROOT, NO!”

“If you step on him, I swear you’re gonna pay.”

“Spit that out, Groot.”

Fortunately bar fights were also short. Drinks made for fast fights, not lasting ones. This one ended with the mutiny crew drooling face-down in the snow, and Quill walking around checking on fighters with injuries. It was dumb, but Rocket kinda liked that Quill cared about little shit like bleeding lips and bumps on heads. His broken-bone checks let Rocket allow his fur to get touched without feeling defensive, and that had, in turn, reduced the number of nights overall that Rocket woke with the phantom taste of Halfworld knock-out drugs in his mouth.

“Hey, Kraglin, if you’re done making nice with the lovebot, can you come help me tune up the Milano’s jump drive?” Rocket asked after Peter finished making sure his skull had the same number of pieces as before. “It’s a two-person job and Groot’s not big enough yet.”

“Yeah,” the mechanic called, shooting a parting grin at the mechanical sex worker, “be there in a bit.”

The two of them were grabbing supplies from the Eclector’s machine bay when Yondu ran in.

“Krams… Quill’s daddy done showed up.”

Kraglin turned pale. Rocket looked between them. “I take it that’s bad?”

“He’s the worst o’ the worst,” Yondu said harshly. “He’s gonna kill Peter, I know it, and there’s nothing I can do.”

“Fuck that noise, blow him outta the sky,” Rocket said, gesturing wildly. He couldn’t lose Peter. He couldn’t lose the Guardians. They mattered to him, and what’s more, unlike just about anyone else he’d ever met, Rocket mattered to them.

“You think I didn’t try to stop that bastard from making off with my boy?” Yondu asked. “He swooped in, in his fancy organic ship, made a big show about having searched everywhere when I failed to deliver Peter, and when I said he could go take a long EVA on a short umbilical, he twisted it all. Damn bastard is canny, made me sound like some kinda monster.”

“Yondu,” Kraglin said slowly. Slowly meant he was thinking hard. “Where’s Peter?”

“Ego took him.” Kraglin drew a sharp breath, turned, and punched a wall.

“So we know this guy is bad news?” Rocket asked. “For sure, I mean. Peter’s a captive.”

“He don’t think it, but yeah.”

Rocket paused. He turned the problem in his head like it was an engine part or a gun that wasn’t coming together. Something hard was pushed into his hands, and he looked down at the metal puzzle Kraglin had handed him. Twisting it helped him think, so he worked it with his hands as he muttered the pieces that had to be moved.

“So Yondu,” Rocket said slowly. “How much do you want Peter back? Because I have a plan, but you aren’t gonna like it.”
“He’s family,” Yondu hissed. “What’s the plan?”

“We’re gonna need that Stakar guy’s help.”

“You’re right, I hate like this plan,” Yondu sighed. “Okay, let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Get along like a house on fire: to enjoy each other very much.
Bail: money paid to release someone from prison.
Yaro root: an alien food plant.
Bugoo: an alien porridge made from grain and lard, served room temperature.
EVA: extra vehicular action, going outside a space ship.
umbilical: the cord connecting the ship and the person during an EVA.

Notes:
Sovereign is a planet of species superiority nuts, and all of the people the Guardians actually care about can be charitably called 'ragtag', which makes Sovereign a very unsafe place to spend much time.

Bugoo is based on the Earth food burgou, which on ships is boiled oats, salted pork, lard, and whatever spare dried veg the cook feels like tossing in that day. It was served on ships as the easiest slop to give hungry sailors that would keep them working, and also in the prisons of the early 1800’s. Bugoo was a staple of Thanos’ household because it gives adequate nutrition at minimal effort. Feeding prisoners or workers nutrient slop or loaf is currently being debated as human rights violation in American courts, which you can read more about here.

EDIT: TheQueeninMourningHasASecret has added the following information on Burgoo as a land-served dish: A burgoo is any soup thickened with grains, from bulgar wheats. When times are thin burgou can be very unpleasant, but in times of plenty, or when the community comes together to make burgoo in the southern tradition (burgoo was/is a common centerpiece at community get togethers such as Armistice day, or during spring picnics). It is commonly rich in foraged meats ranging from fish to squirrel depending on terrain. Basically, it's a soup of anything people can get their hands on, and comes from the French adoption of the Turkic "bulgha" or "burga" which means "to mix, to become mixed".

Rocket has touch-deprivation, which has been linked to mental health concerns. He also has strong touch avoidance, because he's used to touching being either painful and scary (Halfworld doctors experimenting) or degrading and unwelcome (random people petting him without asking). Peter's insistence on after-battle health checks lets Rocket accept touch on his own terms for a specific need, which he knows is good for him overall.

Yondu's phrase "take a long EVA on a short umbilical" is the spacers version of "take a long walk off a short pier". Ego, like many emotional abusers, has mastered the art of making other people's objections to his behavior look like emotional abuse on their part. In this case he turns a real concern for Peter's wellbeing into an attempt to isolate Peter.
Rocket and Kraglin both think better when their hands are moving. For Kraglin, it's an element of his neurodiversity (he's Xandarian, which means it's not exactly autism, but he's not wired to standard specs, either), but for Rocket it's a remnant of his raccoon instincts. Raccoons are known for 'washing' things, but that's actually because their forepaws have outstanding nerve receptors and they use tactile exploration to 'see' better in situations like foraging underwater, feeling under overhangs, and moving in the dark. Rocket also uses his hands to help him figure out complex or abstract problems.

Teaser:

“This is bad, he’s going to flip, and then go full Macaulay Culkin in Home Alone. We gotta go back.”
Chapter 76

Chapter Summary

Painful talks and introspection, as well as a short look at domestic avengers.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Tsita, ValkyriePhoenix, oiseaudemort, Shadows_of_Shemai, tigrisllilium, critterlady, Wynn, TheQueeninMourningHasASecret, Joey99, SionnachOiche3, Selene_Aduial, Notashamed, QueenOfTheQuill, and hhhellcat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter glanced at his friends as Mantis took his father into another room. He didn’t really know what to think of her, his dad raised her, did that make her his sister? The whole family thing hurt to think about, especially with Yondu having been so unreasonable, and Nebula and Gamora having that big fight that ended with Gamora coming with him and Nebula staying with the Ravagers. While the entire argument, both his with Yondu and Gamora’s with her sister, had only taken moments, that sick, spinning feeling of saying things you don’t mean had just now started to fade.

“So this is a mess,” he said, looking between Drax and Gamora.

“It is?” Drax asked. “The ship is quite clean.”

“I meant my fraught emotional landscape, buddy,” Peter sighed. “I love Yondu, he raised me, but was I wrong to want to know my Dad, too?”

“No,” Gamora said firmly, reaching out to touch his arm. “I know what it is to crave family, even when you have it. I sent us to Sovereign for an ungrateful, homicidal, sociopathic sister.”

“That you did,” Peter laughed. Trust Gamora to make things easier even as he watched her own emotions spiral beyond what she knew how to handle.

“If I can fight an Abilisk for someone who hates me, you can open your heart to a father who was absent,” Gamora said firmly.

“I AM GROOT!” screamed Groot, popping up out of Gamora’s bag to tackle the returning Mantis.

“What is this creature?” she asked, holding him up to look at. “He lives, but his mind…. This one has never touched anything like it.”

“That’s Groot, he’s Rocket’s friend… oh shit.” Peter felt his face go cold and the back of his mind warm like the link was trying to activate. “Gamora, Drax, we forgot Rocket! This is bad, he’s going to flip, and then go full Macaulay Culkin in Home Alone. We gotta go back.”

“We cannot go back, Peter Quill,” Mantis said sadly, placing Groot on the chair as he tried to kick her. “Your father controls the ship, and he is resting now. It would be very bad to wake him.”
“I don’t leave my people behind,” Peter insisted. “What about a comm? If we can call him, apologize for leaving while compromised, give him the coords to meet us… he might understand.”

Mantis shook her head. “It is not possible. We have never had need for exterior communications, and the ship is traveling too fast for any. The time dilation of our current speed would make radio communication… unwieldy.”

“What!” Peter yelled. “Time dilation? What time dilation? I know just enough physics to know I do not know how to handle time going wonky on me.”

Drax stood beside him and placed one exceptionally strong arm around him. It felt nice to lean into that strength, to borrow the steadiness of his teammate. Drax felt like a solid place, even when the world was chaos.

“When we get to Ego’s planet, we can send Rocket a message,” Gamora said calmly. “It will be alright. He’s with friends, Peter, he will be safe.”

“Safe and happy are two different things,” Peter grumbled, but he sat. It did no good to panic over something he couldn’t change now. “Mantis, you said something about touching Groot’s mind?”

“If this one touches someone, this one feels their feelings,” Mantis told them.

“Like… a telepath?” Peter pictured Dr. Grey and the mind-room, which was now an abandoned cupboard linking his head and Sandra’s.

“No.” Mantis shook her head, letting her antennas quiver. “Telepaths know thoughts, empaths feel feelings, emotions.”

“Ah.” Peter thought about that. “We might not be safe to touch. Just so you know. None of us are exactly… stable.”

“This one is stronger than you think, Peter Quill,” she said, her voice holding the same reproving tone Sandra had. He smiled and shrugged, holding out a hand. She took it. “You feel… love.”

“Yeah, I guess, I do sort of love everyone in a kind of general, unselfish way…”

“No,” Mantis shook her head. “You feel specific love, for family, for friends, and… romantic love. For her.”

Her hand flew up to point to Gamora and Peter felt his cheeks flush.

“No! I… uh. I’m going to go see what the kitchen situation is,” Peter stammered. As he left, he heard Drax beginning to explain something, his tone firm and kind. Hopefully it was about boundaries, a topic that had taken several repeats and some very nasty fights for the Guardians to learn.

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Yondu didn’t want to have this conversation. He would prefer to do just about anything other than this, but Peter was in danger, and half the Ecloric’s crew had been involved in the Contraxian mutiny. Yondu knew he didn’t have the power to take on Ego yet, and Rocket was just as motivated as he was. He had to be, they were both scared children who grew up into insufferable assholes that tried to push everyone away from them just to avoid being rejected. Which meant someone like Peter, who could accept the harsh edges and still be so bright and happy, well… he was too important for either of them to lose.
“Let me get this straight,” Stakar said slowly. “You want my help to steal some kid from his father? I knew you’d abandoned the code for riches, Yondu, but I never expected you to ask me to sink this low.”

“Ego is evil,” Yondu gritted out. “He’ll kill Peter, same as he killed them other kids of his. Keeping Peter away from him saved his life, Stakar, but I can’t get him back alone.”

“I can’t trust you,” Stakar grunted. “You ain’t my boy anymore. You’re on your own.”

Yondu took a step back. He’d known Stakar was angry when he’d declared Yondu exiled from the fleet, when he’d been the one who broadcast the order not to ever give Yondu a proper captain’s funeral. Somehow, though, he’d thought that Stakar wouldn’t take that anger out on a child. Even on Yondu’s child.

“Now you listen here you fucking potato-faced dishrag,” Rocket yelled, drawing attention... and a gun. He aimed at Stakar and bared his teeth. “I don’t care what from codes or honor or any of that shit. I care about my fucking family, my people. I care about Peter Quill and his loony bin ideas that everyone can be better than they are. I care about Gamora Zenhoberei and the fact she usedta be a killer who worked for evil fucks but has the strongest sense of right and wrong I’ve ever seen. I care about Drax the Destroyer and his big list of ways to keep me from having screaming fits at night. And lastly….”

Rocket heaved a sigh, then cocked the gun. Yondu watched as the energy bar filled. The yellow lights looked like predator eyes, and the slide of them up the barrel made his less advanced feelings sit up and ask to run.

“Lastly, I care about Groot, who got me out of captivity, kept me sane after torture. Who was my only friend. Who fucking died saving the galaxy and came back in baby form. Helpless. Dependant. I don’t care about much, but I care about that defenseless little sprout. And right now, he’s headed to the home of a psychopath who eats his own children. So you’re going to give us ships, and guns, and warriors to fight this Ego creep, or I’m going to set you on fire, extinguish the flames, and shove your blistered ass out an airlock. Capiche?”

It was Stakar’s turn to be shocked, it seemed, as he staggered backwards.

“I’d answer the man,” Kraglin said quietly. He had a scary look on his face as he passed Yondu to stand beside Rocket. Nebula beside him, a deadly blue shadow hovering at the first mate’s side, critically eyeing the edge on a knife as she moved.

“We all want Quill safe,” Tullk said, stepping up on Rocket’s other side. “Kid’s somewhat family now. And he passed his Transition Trials, he’s earned the crew’s respect.”

Oblo stepped up next. Then Jafir. The crew who normally would stand behind a Ravager captain to show his strength moved forward, changing the game. Suddenly, Stakar was toe to toe with an entire line of fighters. Yondu felt his cheeks go cool and he pushed up his courage as he stepped up directly behind Rocket, using the gap made by the shorter being to lock eyes with the man who’d saved his life all those years ago. They didn’t agree, they might never, but Yondu knew one thing… Stakar understood family, and Peter was family.

“Stakar, hurt me all you want,” Yondu offered. “I deserve that and more, I know. I’ve done watched my own boy go off and do some stupid shit, though the cosmos kindly made him a better man than I’ll ever be, so I know how I hurt you. But if you try to blame Peter Quill for my mess, you ain’t no better than Ego, and you ain’t no better than me. I let greed blind me, till Quill worked his sticky little fingers past my walls. You really gonna let pride blind you, too?”
Stakar blinked. “You love the boy.”

“Well, damn, Stakar, ‘course I do!” Yondu spat. “I’m his Daddy, how the hells else am I supposed to feel ‘bout him?”

“I guess I can give you a few ships,” Stakar said slowly. “I’m not sure I want to risk having my men follow you. You’re not exactly trustworthy anymore, Yondu. I wish you were, but I can’t just ask people who last heard of you trading in kids to follow you.”

“Ships’ll work,” Yondu agreed. It was more than he expected.

“And guns,” Rocket added. “I’ll need lots of guns. And one of the back-up batteries for that guy’s spinegraft.”

“Rocket,” Yondu said warningly. Peter had been mad as hell about the quip over Vorker’s eye.

“That’s a diluvian purple-core haptic system,” Rocket said slowly. “I know, I looked into it because Peter wanted to be able to bring home a nice new neural interface for his cousin with the missing arm. Diluvians aren’t suitable for his situation, because their power sources, in addition to being proprietary and non-interchangeable, are kinda volatile. But for this, they’re perfect, because hey guess what, they’re volatile. I’m killing a god, I need volatile.”

“They’re also damn expensive and you’ve had the talk about adaptives. It’s wrong to steal them, Peter said you understood that now.”

“I do,” Rocket said, nodding. He’d gone from screaming and threatening to still and frightening. “But my moral nav sys is off about to get murdered by a Celestial serial killer. So. Get me that battery, Yondu. I have family to save.”

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Meanwhile, on Earth, another family was having dinner. Darcy had insisted Clint and Natasha come over to the triad’s apartment in the tower for dinner, and since Pepper had to go to France for a meeting, Tony had wandered down and they’d added a plate to the table. He usually went to Bruce and Betty’s place when Pepper was absent, but Betty had gotten a cold and Bruce was stressed out trying to take care of her. The stress was also affecting Tony, and the only way to stop that from becoming a nasty feedback loop was extended time away from Bruce. Fortunately, they’d gotten better at willingly stepping out of the dynamic they started in when they needed to.

“So, I got a new job,” Bucky announced after serving out the individual meatloafs Steve had made. “I’m looking forward to having something outside of the Avengers to do.”

“Cool!” Darcy agreed happily, dishing up some mashed potatoes for Tony. “Doing what?”

“Well, Coulson stopped by because apparently Strike Team Theta needs a handler who can actually handle Strike Team Theta,” Bucky replied drily. “And I just so happen to have experience with reckless little shits with exceptional stubbornness.”

“Ignoring you,” Steve said around a mouthful of potatoes.

Tony laughed. “Aaaw, who’d they make cry this time? I swear, one day I will adopt all those girls. Especially Charis, I like her.”

“Pepper will murder you,” Darcy said calmly. “Although I also want to know who they made cry.”
“And how?” Clint added, waving his fork for emphasis. “I need the gossip for SciDiv.”

“To be fair,” Nat said slowly, snagging a green bean from Clint’s plate, “for a long time, they kept getting HYDRA handlers who looked at ‘bubbly gymnast’ and assumed that meant ‘airheaded and gullible’. They may have gotten into the habit of breaking first, and asking questions later. At least it keeps incompetents off their case.”

“That and they have a severe allergy to ‘No, you can’t’ in any form,” Clint added with a shrug. “It makes them break out into ‘Watch me’, ‘Wanna bet?’, and ‘Hold my beer’ with all the results that go with those reactions. So… good luck Bucky?”

“Maybe offer up some actual solutions, bird-boy,” Tony reprimanded. “I know you’ve worked with them, you talk about them like they’re your baby sisters.”

“Easy,” Clint said. “I bribe them with food, it works very well for me. Phil avoids ‘no’ and goes with listing off every reason, no matter how improbable, that it might be a bad idea until they huff and walk away. Nat…”

“…teaches them how to do the thing **better**,” she interrupted. “They don’t actually enjoy injury, if you give them a way to do what they want that doesn’t result in time in Medical, then they’ll do that instead.”

“So… handle them like I handled you?” Bucky asked.

“Exactly,” Nat agreed, with a small smile on her face. “They’re much like the older graduates of the Red Room, determined, talented, and stubborn to a fault. Treat them like you treated myself, Nika, and Katenka, and they’ll love you like we did… and like us, they’re exceptionally loyal to the ones they love.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
- Coords: coordinates, location.
- Capiche: derived from Italian ‘capiscimi’ meaning "understand me", used in old mobster movies.
- Moral nav sys: the spacer equivalent of a moral compass.

Notes:
- Macaulay Culkin played Kevin in Home Alone, a movie about a boy who is accidentally left at home alone during his family's vacation. Kevin is a brilliant engineer and constructs many traps to foil thieves, but that level of destructive genius is not okay to leave unattended.

Travel at near-light-speed tends to change how you experience time’s passing. Basically, the faster you travel in space, the slower you travel in time, so a year you spend close to lightspeed could be four years for someone on a planet. The jump system used by everyone but Ego eliminates that problem by doing instant transfer between specific points, but Ego is not shown using a jump-drive. I suspect he goes fast to prolong his own life, effectively 'skipping' time he doesn't want to spend. However, that produces all kinds of headaches for communication tech, especially as the ship effectively is Ego.
Stakar banished Yondu for the crime of child trafficking (taking Ego's kids to him), cutting him off from Ravager support. That kind of hard-core shunning is hard on most people, and Yondu dealt with it by focusing on being the best substitute dad he could and bringing his crew together into a real family. Now that the ones who didn't want to be family but liked the lack of code to live by are out of the way, the remaining crew are much more focused on keeping the family together, inadvertently proving that Yondu learned his lesson.

Gamora didn't have a canon last name, but her species is the Zenhoberei, and I headcanon she uses that as a last name, because she is the last of them.

Rocket really did learn after the lecture on why we don't frivolously ask for body parts, and how adaptive tech for disability counts as a body part. He's also critically low on fucks to give and rapidly running out of cope, so he'll grab whatever helps the goal. This is the first time Yondu's seen Rocket in ruthless mode, so he assumes it's the previously seen asshole mode.

Teaser:

“Peter Quill is a bit of an idiot,” Drax sighed. “Gamora trusts him to orbit her like a love-sick moon. That is a metaphor. He will not go after her, because he is pathetic and afraid he will fail.”
Chapter 77

Chapter Summary

On Ego, things aren't what they seem.

Chapter Notes

I'm running a little behind today, I will come back and edit in the Love Fest, but I wanted you to have this now. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter was in awe of his father’s planet, it was beautiful, magical, exactly how his mother had said it would be. It also highlighted the appropriate nature of his father’s chosen name. The entire place was a temple to Ego’s amazingness, rendered in funky 1970’s flair. Even the statues that told the story of Ego’s birth, life, and relationship with Meredith Quill were slightly tacky looking, the sheen of new plastic instead of the care-worn wrapping paper of Peter’s personal altar to his mother. It hurt to have Ego talk so casually of her, to act like his love for her was some great, cosmic affair, destined or star crossed. He was trying too hard to fill shoes he’d never worn.

“My mother told everyone my father was from the stars,” Peter told him after Gamora had guided Drax and Groot away. “She had brain cancer, so of course everyone thought she was delusional. Not that single mothers in the Ozarks are normally considered the pillars of rational thought, anyway, but the spaceman story… didn’t help.”

“I didn’t want to leave your mother, Peter,” Ego said softly. “But if I don’t return regularly to this planet, and the light within, this form will wither and perish.”

“Then why not come back?” Peter asked. He hoped there would be a good reason, like the time requirement on the Odinsleep, something to explain. “Why stay away, why hire criminals to pick me up and bring me to you?”

“I loved your mother, Peter! I couldn’t stand to set foot on an earth where she wasn’t living! You can’t imagine what that’s like!” Ego yelled.

“I don’t have to imagine,” Peter hissed back. “I watched her die.”

Ego rocked back. Peter could see the reflection of hurt, one he knew from the mirror. He took a deep breath.

“Look, I get it. I’ve had my own M-Ship free and clear since I was sixteen years old. I learned the starways when I was ten. I knew how to go home, I had people at home begging me to come back. God knows I would have been welcomed with open arms. I couldn’t go until I got past something. But I tried, Ego, I tried to let my family know how much I loved them. I did what I could. You… you pulled a runner and never came back.”
“Over the millions and millions of years of my existence I have made many mistakes, Peter,” Ego admitted. He looked at the ground, ashamed. “But you’re not one of them. Please give me the chance to be the father she would want me to be. There are so many things I need to teach you. This planet, and the light within... they are a part of you.”

“What?”

Ego stepped towards him. “Let me show you, son. Just take your hands, cup them. Close your eyes… Good, now take your brain to the center of the planet.”

Peter took a deep breath. It was just like Darcy’s breathing exercises for staying calm in an emergency. Or Bucky’s tricks for total stillness when sniping. Only instead of hearing his heart to shoot between beats, he was hearing the seismic shifts below his feet.

“Yes! Wow, you’ve got it!” Peter opened his eyes to look at his father. Then down to where his hands were glowing. “You’ve got your old man’s talent as well as his rugged good looks!”

“Yeah,” Peter said, feeling awe build in his chest for the magical light. “What now?”

“Now we shape it,” Ego said, summoning his own light, bending it like clay, forming a ball. Peter closed his eyes and focused, the fuzzy feeling in his hands, the not-quite-real sensation. “What’s that?”

Peter opened his eyes and looked down. He hadn’t actually thought about it, but if his dad was an alien, he had no reason to know. “It’s Captain America’s shield… sorta. The real one is bigger, and has a slightly different curve. It should still work though.”

“Why would you build a shield, son?” Ego looked hurt. “Don’t you trust me, Peter? I’m your dad.”

“It’s not that!” Peter insisted. He hefted the shield. So far all his practice had been with Steve in the mind-space and he wasn’t sure that would carry over. “Watch this.”

He worked his wrist to flick the shield like a discus. The shield zipped off across the alien plain, hit a rock and rebounded. It was going to sail past Peter’s stretched out hand, and he panicked, only to have it duck down in the last few feet to land in his palm.

“You’re home, Peter,” Ego said, tears gathering in his eyes. Peter smiled at him.

“Thanks… Dad.”

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Drax wandered through the palace of Ego, looking at the strange and wondrous things, plants he had never seen, the artwork and architecture. Peter’s father was indeed a skilled being, although Drax still had to feel a preference for Yondu. He was the rightful father of Peter Quill’s spirit, which was why Drax still followed him. Perhaps together, they could improve Peter’s competence, which was the one thing Drax could wish was better. He had potential, but wasted it. Most aggravating. He sighed and shook his head, looking around for a distraction.

He saw Mantis sitting alone on a terrace and decided to sit with her. She was strange, but also sweet, and kind to Groot, even when the little tree attacked her. Kindness to Groot was worth many things, and Drax appreciated strangers showing that.

“How did you get here?” he asked her.
“Do you mean to this room, or to this planet?”

“To this life. How did you come to work for Ego?”

“He found me. This one was a larva, orphaned on her homeworld, alone. Ego took me and raised me by hand, kept me as his own.”

“So you are his daughter?” Drax asked. Another, more upsetting idea came on the heels of that one. The way she said things, it reminded him of Peter discussing a canine he had on Terra. “Or his pet.”

“I am not his child,” Mantis said firmly. Her eyes were wider now. “I am not Celestial. I suppose to one like him, I am a pet.”

“That does not seem right,” Drax muttered, but Mantis looked frightened. He did not want to upset her. A joke might make her feel more at ease. “Most people want cute pets. Why would Ego keep a hideous one?”

“I am hideous?” She asked, and Drax felt his heart tighten painfully. This was not what he had wanted.

“No, Mantis… I did not mean that.”

“Then why did you say it?”

He remembered the time he had called Gamora a whore as a joke and been soundly beaten while Peter looked at him with disappointment. They did not seem to understand the type of humor where you say a thing that is clearly and utterly not true, to be funny. They were his friends, though, so he abided their rules, even when those rules were set by their limitations. In turn, they respected the time it took him to learn their slang and metaphors.

“Mantis, I am not of your people. To my people, you would be quite horrifying to look at. But beauty is not the same all places. Peter Quill has lain with an A’askavarian, after all. Besides, to be ugly is an advantage. When you are ugly and someone loves you, you know they love you for who you are. Beautiful people never know who to trust.”

“Then I am happy to be ugly,” Mantis smiled. “How does Gamora trust Peter Quill? He thinks her the most beautiful.”

“Peter Quill is a bit of an idiot,” Drax sighed. “Gamora trusts him to orbit her like a love-sick moon. That is a metaphor. He will not go after her, because he is pathetic and afraid he will fail.”

Mantis nodded, thinking over the information. Drax took a breath and let himself settle. The pools of water they were facing from this terrace were quite beautiful.

“Those pools remind me of a time I took my daughter to visit the Forgotten Lakes on my homeworld. She was like you.”

“Ugly?”

“Innocent. She was cut down by Ronan before she could fight in her first hunt.” Mantis reached for his hand. Drax pulled it back. “Think first, you do not want to be hurt.”

“I am stronger than either you or Quill believes,” she said, and he let her take his hand. He watched as her eyes became wet, and tears flowed down her face, like little rivers.
“I have never met anyone like you, or your friends. You are filled with such... love. It is a thing I did not know existed, not like this, and I think... I think it may be the very finest of all things. It both hurts and soothes the heart.”

“That is a great truth,” Drax said solemnly, and pulled her under his arm as he had seen Quill do with children after battles, to give comfort.

“Drax, I must tell you…” she started.

“There you are!” exclaimed Gamora, startling Mantis.

This planet was disturbing to Gamora. She could see the beauty in it, but it was just a bit too vibrant, too loud and flashy, no matter how strongly she pushed at the limits. It did not fit in her mind alongside Peter Quill, who was flashy only until shown the smallest touch of love, who used his vibrant spirit as a shield in the dark.

“Mantis, can you show us where we’ll be staying? I think the planet is giving me eye-strain. It is most unpleasant, and I think a nap might fix it.”

“Yes, of course. Please follow this one to your rooms.”

Gamora looked at her as she departed, and fell silently into step beside Drax. He shot her a look of concern, and Gamora nodded. Something was wrong. He raised a brow. She was the better communicator. Their plan agreed on, Gamora moved a bit faster, and stood beside Mantis as they entered the sleeping rooms.

“Why are there no other creatures on this planet? I’ve seen no mammals, no reptiles, and there is no sound of birds or insects. It’s unusual for a planet with such diverse plant life to have no animals.”

“The planet is Ego,” Mantis explained calmly, with the air of one who has heard the same lecture taught many times, asked to repeat it. “A dog does not invite a flea to live on his back.”

That. That made Gamora want to growl.

“You are not a flea,” she insisted, fighting herself to keep her voice even.

“No,” Mantis agreed, “I have a purpose, I help him sleep. I am more like a pet.”

“People aren’t pets,” Gamora started. Drax bumped her arm as he passed. To anyone who hadn’t navigated the morning dance by the bathrooms with him, it would seem a simple clumsy misstep. He was large and bulky and spoke oddly, so that would seem fitting, but Gamora knew he had an agility beyond even her own when dealing with friends. She took the warning and dropped the subject. “So, what were you going to tell Drax before I stepped out on to the terrace?”

Drax rolled his eyes at her behind Mantis’ back.

“Nothing,” Mantis lied.

“Please,” Drax said, stepping between them. “Don’t lie. It doesn’t fit with your innocence. Whatever it is, we can work it out.”

“Would it help if I left the room?” Gamora offered. Mantis shook her head and looked at the ground as she moved quickly from the room at a not-quite run. Gamora turned to look at Drax.
“Something's not right here.”

“No. It is most certainly not.” Drax sighed. “I will watch after Groot while you sleep.”

Gamora nodded. At least she had someone to watch her back while they waited to know who they were going to be killing on this unnatural planet.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Pulled a runner: to run away from responsibility.

Notes:
It's not specified in canon where in Missouri Peter comes from, but his Mom and Grandad both had accents that imply the Ozarks, backed up by the flashback that looked relatively rural. The Ozarks are an area in south-central Missouri known for great camping, fun tourist attractions, and an overall rather conservative mindset socially speaking.

In canon, Peter couldn't hold the light at first. In this story, he's gotten relaxation/concentration training from some of the best in the biz. Ego is going to try to take whatever credit he can, though, and Peter doesn't know this isn't genetic.

Canon in this story is that Mantis is actually Ego's child, but she did not inherit the Celestial gene. She was however useful, so Ego did not kill her. Instead he kept her, told her he found her orphaned, and allowed and encouraged her to think of herself as an object not a person. Mantis knows what he does to his kids, and is grateful she isn't his child out of self preservation. Drax asking if she's Ego's daughter makes her scared for that reason.

Drax makes a particularly tone-deaf comment in the first Guardians movie, calling Gamora a whore, despite his people not understanding metaphor and Gamora clearly not being a sex worker. I'm retconning that choice to a later date and making it a specific type of rough humor enjoyed by Drax's people involving untrue statements.

Mantis in the comics refers to herself as "This One" and Mantis in the movie used "I". I've decided that "This One" is her formal setting for those she has not felt out as an Empath and liked what she saw. She's comfortable with Drax now, but Gamora hasn't let herself be read.

Gamora's history makes her very leery of the Ego-Mantis relationship, she sees too many dark reflections in it.

Teaser:
"Should is for hopeful little children who still believe in things like friendship and justice."
Chapter 78

Chapter Summary

Backup assembles and heads towards Ego. A.K.A. the ‘ride’ portion of ride or die.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! This one goes out to Beth_Mac, hhhellcat, Tsita, Wynni, ValkyriePhoenix, Joey99, SionnachOiche3, Shadows_of_Shemai, Selene_Aduial, and psyche29.

Rocket finished his last set of overdrive modifications to the Eclector’s railguns. He nodded to himself and hopped off the worktable. Yondu looked over at him from the battle console, and Rocket nodded.

“So, what’s the big deal between you an’ Stakar anyway?” he asked, wedging his feet in the gaps of the table by Yondu’s left hand to climb up for a more personable talk. “You steal his ladyfriend somewhere?”

“I was a Kree battle-slave for twenty years when Stakar freed me. He offered me a place in the Ravagers. Said all I needed to do was adhere to the code. But I was young and greedy and stupid,” Yondu said, sighing. He stepped away from the console and rubbed his face. “Worked out what seemed like an easy money gig with this bigshot from way out on the edge of known space. Ferry his kids to him from wherever he’d whelped ‘em.”

“That sounds like it bit you in the ass,” Rocket commented, carefully not looking at Yondu. Why was it, in his life, when he met reasonably tough people, they felt the need to tell him their emotional sob-story of a past?

“It did.” Yondu turned and looked at Rocket, and Rocket returned the favor by gazing somewhere over Yondu’s shoulder. “Me and Stakar, and the other captains - we weren’t so different from you and your friends. They were the only family I ever had. But I broke the code. They exiled me.”

“That strikes me as one of those ‘personal problems’ people have nowadays,” Rocket deferred. He didn’t like the idea of a family like his breaking that easily. Temptation was far too common in Rocket’s life, and if a little easy money could get Yondu kicked out… what would happen when Groot was big enough to help Rocket snap up a quick score?

“I’m trying to pass on some wisdom, you jackass,” Yondu snorted. “It don’t seem to be taking into that little bitty skull of yours, though.”

“I don’t need your fucking wisdom,” Rocket snapped. Yondu started laughing and Rocket felt his ears flatten in annoyance and shame. “What are you laughing at me for?!”

“You can fool yourself and everyone else but you can’t fool me,” Yondu said. “I know who you
“You don’t know anything about me, loser,” Rocket retorted, standing up on the table to point at Yondu’s chest.

“I know everything about you. I know you play like the meanest and the hardest ‘cause you actually the most scared of all.”

“Shut up!” Rocket protested.

“I know you push away anyone who’s willing to put up with you, ‘cause just a little bit of love reminds you how big and empty that hole inside you actually is!” Yondu yelled back. “I know the scientists what made you never gave a rat’s ass about you.”

“I’m serious, dude,” Rocket warned, hand going for his gun.

“Just like my own damn parents, who sold me, their own little baby, into slavery! I know who you are, boy, because you’re me.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, and Rocket was struck with the feeling like he’d had the first time he’d beat a test on Halfworld with a mirror. Seeing something that wasn’t how he thought of his inner self, but knowing it was his own image.

“What kind of pair are we?” Rocket asked with a huff.

“The kind that’s about to go fight a planet I reckon.”

“All right, okay, that’s - Wait. Fight a what?”

“Nebula, darlin’,” Yondu said, ignoring Rocket as Gamora’s kooky sister walked in. “You’ve got the con while the rest of us are in stasis.”

“Wait, what.” Rocket shook his head, sure something was utterly wrong. “Why’s she got the con?”

“It ain’t healthy for a mammalian body to hop over fifty jumps at a time.”

“I know that,” Rocket said, waving the distraction away. “So Nebula ain’t a mammal, what’s that got to do with anything?”

“We’re about to do seven-hundred.”

“Oh.”

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Peter wandered his father’s gallery, feeling unaccountably lonely as he stared again at the animation of his mother. Yet again, he poked at that place in his mind that was Sandra. For once, it was open.

“Sandra?” he said into the space.

“Peter! What’s going on? I’ve been trying to reach you for ages. The link is reactivating and something feels off.” Her thought-self gestured wildly as she talked, and Peter felt a touch guilty for worrying her. However, as her words clicked together, he had his own worries.

“What? I thought it wasn’t supposed to do that.”
“Apparently, you’re not as done as we thought, and you’re in danger.” She rolled her eyes at him. He couldn’t exactly see it, without more people their mindscape was vague and hazy, lacking details. “Or else I couldn’t be here to tell you to stop being an idiot and making people want you dead.”

“No, I’m not,” Peter protested. “In danger or making people want me dead. I’m with my father. Get this, he’s a Celestial.”

“Uh. Huh. Ok, tell me about him.” She looked skeptical, but she waited for him to talk.

So Peter did. Enthusiastically. The longer he talked, the more worried Sandra became, her concern slapping at his face like sea-fog.

“I take it you’re not thrilled about this development.”

“He sounds like he was specifically constructed to push your worst buttons,” Sandra said with her special brand of honest. It hurt, but she didn’t lie when her voice took that flat tone. “And he drove a wedge between you and the Yondad, which I’m not happy about.”

“Yondu made his own bed when he kidnapped me,” Peter pointed out. “He has a grudge against Ego, he said it himself.”

“He has lots of grudges,” Sandra returned, “which ones result in him telling you not to talk to the person?”

“Okay, that’s fair. I’m not happy about it, but it’s fair. But that can’t be the case here, Ego is my dad, he loved my mom, he wants to have a chance to love me.” Peter sighed. “He wants me to trust him, and I feel guilty about it, but… I don’t yet. This is all just way too fast.”

“Hang on, I’m getting Dr. Grey.”

“What? Sandra?”

He didn’t have to wait long. The space in his head suddenly grew as Jean joined the link, followed by an older bald man in a suit.

“Hello, Peter. This is my teacher, Professor Charles Xavier. Sandra expressed some concerns about your father, and we thought it prudent to come talk to you.”

Nebula sighed. She hated jumps, they weren’t medically unsafe for non-mammalian species, but they were still uncomfortable. Her partner for this trip was of a race of cephalopodic creatures from a water world, basically a large, angry mass of tentacles in a long hooded robe. Not exactly the most entertaining companion.

Jafir smiled as she looked over at him during last checks. The tentacles on his face made the gesture simultaneously a goofy expression and a terrifying one. Nebula snorted.

“What’s so funny?”

“Pleased am I that this task is not mine alone this day. Often have I in these chairs myself and no other found. A pleasure it is that with another this chore I share.”

Nebula stared at him bemusedly a moment as she parsed out his accent and grammar. She could
respect the Ravager preference for learning the common languages of the stars instead of relying on translator implants when possible, but it led to some bizzare syntax. Rolling her eyes she huffed is irritation at his familiarity. “Stuff it. I’m not your friend.”

“Well this is, for no friends have I. Shared misery, rather than misery alone is that which I enjoy.” He rippled his neck tentacles in amusement at her.

Nebula smirked. “In that we are agreed. I shall enjoy your suffering.”

“And I yours.”

“Let’s do this thing,” Nebula sighed, fastening her harness and slamming the button.

Jumps, even short ones, jarred. Long journeys taken quickly simply compressed the jump-jar effect into moments, but magnified the severity of it. She was still somewhat nauseous as she helped the Captain from his stasis-rig, but not as weak as he was. Stasis may have saved their lives, but it left mammals a bit wobbly.

“You are not able to go to the surface yet,” she noted as she handed out stimulant packs. “I will land first, and find my sister.”

“We’ve all got family down there,” said the first mate and mechanic. His face scrunched oddly. “You shouldn’t hafta go alone.”

“Should makes no difference to must,” Nebula returned. “Gamora must be warned of the nature of the world she walks, prepared to fight and flee. She must have a capable fighter beside her, because she must survive. Therefore, I must land to ensure those things happen. Should is for hopeful little children who still believe in things like friendship and justice.”

He looked as though she’d struck him. It felt... unwelcome in her heart. She tried to think what she’d said to cause that look.

“I didn’t mean to call you a child,” she said. “But Thanos carved those things from my body long ago, I cannot help thinking of them as childish, as I was only allowed them as a child.”

“He left you no justice?” Kraglin whispered, voice cracking. “No friends?”

“He left me Gamora,” Nebula said with a shrug, working the clasp on her armor to better settle it. “He thought if he punished me for losing to her by replacing me bit by bit, I would hate her, and that was allowed. Gamora is my sister, my family. You don’t have to like family to love them. That’s where he erred.”

Rocket came back from the small storage bay he’d slipped off to after reviving and handed Nebula a bag. “Should be helpful, and I put in some communicators so you can call us for shooting the crap outta Planet-Face. When I can aim again, I’ll be ready to blow this dude into an asteroid belt, just get our people off the surface. If you get frustrated with her, don’t walk off, think ‘bout happy things. You can do whatever you want after saving them.”

Nebula nodded. The little creature was pragmatic, violent, broken in ways she understood. “I will find my sister, warn her, and help her evacuate her friends. Then, I will hunt my father like a dog and I will tear him apart slowly, piece by piece, until he knows some semblance of the profound and unceasing pain I know every single day.”

“Anyway, uh, happy trails,” Kraglin said, pointing her to a small landing craft.
Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Con: control of a ship, particularly when it's being handed from the normal leader to a substitute.
Jump-jar: the wobbly effect seen in canon where their faces get stretched.

Notes:
Rocket doesn't like that he has to manage his emotions, and he doesn't care for having to manage other people's emotions. So he tends to prickle up when emotional topics arise. But Yondu recognizes Rocket's patterns and he wants to prevent something bad. Thus, fight. Don't worry about them, they're just assholes being pals.

Mirror tests are done with animals to determine if they can identify reflections of themselves, or if they treat it like another animal behind glass. Animals classed as less smart don't show recognition of their own reflection, animals classed as near-or-beyond human intelligence can, as well as identify pictures of themselves and those close to them. Rocket was subjected to experiments in intellect-augmentation, and the mirror test was used to track early progress. His first jump in brain power happened during a mirror test, which he recalls here.

Nebula is shown reaching Ego with no major issue, despite all the mammals (and Groot, which is why I think it's not that it's fine, just not deadly) puking and passing out. I'm assuming that's because she is a) not a mammal that canon would say couldn't use 700 jumps, and b) cybernetically enhanced to avoid the worst symptoms, hence having the con ahead of a seasoned Ravager like Jafir. There's still a chance he's going to pass out during 700 jumps.

Sandra isn't great with emotions or people first hand, but she's great at figuring out when someone's story has 2+2=banana. She reeealilly doesn't like what Ego is encouraging Peter to do or feel, and she's also upset Peter cut off his support systems. Fortunately for Peter, she has psychic teachers with advanced degrees in family psychology.

Cutting off someone who doesn't like a new person in your life is a tricky thing. Sometimes, the first person is actually being clingy/jealous/possessive, but it's just as likely the new person is manipulating you into closing paths to help. If you're in that situation, try to measure past reactions to new people from Person A. If they've got a bad habit of being a jerk to your friends, it might be best to drop them. If they've been fine around healthy people and only change their behavior when toxic people have approached you, you'll want to look at Person B for warning signs. If Person B is pushing the dumping of Person A, look real hard at if the relationship is developing naturally and comfortably. In any case, it helps to have a 3rd party only beholden to you, like a therapist or a parent, who can double check your instincts if you ask.

Jafir is basically eight feet of octopi tentacles and sass. I love him so much. His people visited Earth once, and left after a very rude encounter with a particularly rude New England author (H.P. Lovecraft).

Kraglin and Nebula have lovely canon chemistry wherein Krags wants Nebs to be kind to herself and make good choices and Nebula looks like she's confused how this small babby ended up first mate on a pirate ship, he lacks all self-preservation. I intend to
explore that friendship where I can.

Teaser:

“I cannot deny him a father,” Gamora said, feeling her control threaten to break. She allowed herself a few tears. “But I thought he’d already found his family.”
Gamora was stalking the halls of the enormous mansion, looking for Peter. His music guided her to him, and he smiled as she knocked the edge of the door with her knuckles.

“Gamora!” he said with a bright look that strained the edges of his face. “Dance with me?”

“Quill…,” she said warningly. She didn’t want to hurt him, but she did need to tell him what she’d learned of Ego’s conduct towards Mantis.

“Come on,” he begged. “This is Sam Cooke, one of the greatest Earth singers of all time.”

Now she knew something was up. She liked Peter’s music, especially what he called ‘soul’ music, including Sam Cooke. He knew that. She laughed and let him pull her into his arms. She felt the tension under her hands, and knew he’d figured things out. “This is nice, but I still prefer Harry Chapin,” she lied. She’d never heard Chapin himself sing Cat’s in the Cradle, but Peter knew it well, and it said what she needed.

Peter nodded. “It’s harder to dance to,” he said. Then his smile went from strained to real. “Drax still thinks you’re not a dancer.”

Gamora felt her cheeks flush. “If you ever tell anyone about this, I’ll kill you.”

“Understood.”

“It’s nice though.”

“Yeah.”

They finished the song. Peter looked at her deeply, his gaze catching every inch of her. It should be terrifying, that he could see so deeply into her, when she had hidden her truth away like gems in a vault, but this was Peter. He was always there, always helping her to grow and learn, ready to catch her when she fell. He earned the right to see her innermost self by giving love to her strength and her
weakness.

“Will we ever talk about this… thing, between us?” she asked him. Peter turned pink and looked away. “You’re terrible at lying, I know you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, the Cheers Sam-and-Diane, guy and girl on a TV show who dig each other but never say it ’cause when they do the ratings would go down sort of thing?”

“I think your translator is broken,” she teased. “Yes, that thing.”

“I didn’t want to bring that thing up,” Peter said. “It would feel like I was pressuring you, and I want you to have the time you need to figure you out, away from Thanos. I’m not going anywhere, though. If you need or want me, I’ll be right there.”

“That’s fair,” she said, sighing. “Now is maybe not a good time for it anyway. Something is wrong. Mantis is scared of something… and she thinks she’s your father’s pet.”

Peter went pale. He closed his eyes and bit his lower lip until she worried he would draw blood. “That son of a bitch.”

“My thoughts,” she agreed. “What do we do?”

“Slap me.”

“What!”

“Slap me,” Peter repeated. “Make it look like you’re really angry. Like when you thought I was making a move on Knowhere. Storm off, then get the communicator working and call Rocket. Have him bring Yondu and whoever is willing to help get us out of here. I can distract my dad, he wants the fatherhood experience, let’s give him some girl troubles to advise me on.”

Gamora slapped him. It wasn’t hard to make her general anger into a hard, targeted strike that reddened his skin. Of course, as his hand went up to his jaw and she saw tears bead at the edges of his eyes, her own eyes burned and her lip threatened to tremble. She turned and ran through the halls. Ego caught her as she reached the edge of the palace grounds.

“Gamora, what’s wrong?”

“Peter is…” she didn’t know what to say, what lie to tell. She knew he needed to go to his son, their plan depended on it, but given there was no problem, what should she say?

“Did he flirt with you?” Ego asked. “He’s my son, I assume he’s charming when he wants to be.”

She suddenly didn’t feel like feeding this monster’s ego, plan or no plan. “Actually, we were fighting about you. Peter feels he can ignore Drax and myself, now that he has you. He says he’s finally found his family.”

“He has,” Ego said. “I’m his father, his family, and we’re together at last. You can’t begrudge him that, can you?”

“I cannot deny him a father,” Gamora said, feeling her control threaten to break. She allowed herself a few tears. “But I thought he’d already found his family.”

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sitting in a field of grass working on some machine. Nebula buzzed past Gamora to catch her attention before landing, but her sister’s reflexes were too good and a longknife impaled the lander’s secondary stabilizer, driving the ship to crash into a cavern.

“You psychopath!” Gamora shrieked as Nebula crawled from the wreckage. “Are you trying to get us killed!”

“Me? You’re the one who *stabbed my ship!*” She vaulted towards her sister out of instinct, an old fight, perhaps her oldest fight, since it never really ended, just paused while Thanos tortured her in the name of equality. Gamora’s reactions were sloppy, slow and weak. Nebula tucked the concern she felt into her secret mind, the place within her where nothing, not even Thanos, could get at it. Then, she fought.

Finally, with a rush of something akin to joy, she had Gamora on her back, a blade at her throat. “I win.”

“What?”

“I bested you in combat, *I win,*” Nebula clarified. The giddy rush of excitement lit her nerves like the battle-drugs of the Skrulls.

“Nebula, I really don’t need this. My day has been bad enough,” Gamora said, and Nebula pushed her back down with the hand not holding a blade.

“I don’t need you always trying to beat me,” Nebula said, trying to explain. She needed her sister to understand that the fight was over, no mater how long it had taken. Gamora rolled her eyes in derision.

“I’m not the one who just flew across the universe because I wanted to win!”

“Don’t tell me what I want!”

“I don’t have to because you make it obvi—”

“YOU WERE THE ONE WHO WANTED TO WIN, I JUST WANTED A SISTER!” Nebula roared, sitting back hard on the cavern floor. “You were all I had, but you were the one who needed to win! Thanos pulled my eye from my head and my brain from my skull and my arm from my body because you just *had* to win.”

Gamora looked shocked.

“Is that really what you thought of me?” she asked, sounding broken. “That I didn’t care about your pain? That I wanted to *win*? Why didn’t you ever ask me what I really wanted?”

“I didn’t have to because you made it obvious,” Nebula spat, tossing her sister’s words back at her spitefully.

“Thanos told me I had to win, or he would kill you,” Gamora said blankly. The light that Nebula had seen on Sovereign was gone, and for a moment she seemed as dull and lifeless as if Nebula had killed her. “You know he always called me his favorite. He said if his favorite were bested, he would send the one who did the besting to his lover as a gift. It was a sort of test, beat me, meet her. You know what that means.”

“That scum-sucking worm,” Nebula hissed, pulling her sister into her arms and petting her hair. “We’ll kill him. Don’t you worry, we’re going to blow a big hole in his fat purple face. Rip him to
shreds and burn the remains. Doesn’t that sound fun?”

“You are a strange woman,” Gamora laughed. “But so am I. That sounds very fun. But first we need to get Peter and the rest off this stupid planet.”

Nebula recoiled in unpleasant shock. How could she forget? This was bad.

“Gamora… Ego… he kills his children.”

“Say what now?”

Mantis crept quietly through the halls of the palace. She knew her Master was busy, his smugness pressed at her like it was a shoe grinding to snuff out an ember. Or rather, like a boot should step upon an insect, not malice, just a grand sense that only the keeper of the boot mattered. She had time, then, to warn the kind and loving man who had been brought here so wrongly.

“Drax?” she whispered as she shook his arm. “Drax, we need to talk.”

“Kmria?” he mumbled at her as she shook his arm. She gasped and pulled back as she realized she was slipping her own fear under his skin. “Mantis! What is it?”

“Ego’s gotten exactly what he wanted. I should have told you earlier,” Mantis felt her resolve weaken, her lip trembling as her eyes filled with wetness. “I am sorry. This one is so stupid. You are in danger, and it is the fault of this one.”

“You are by no means stupid, Mantis,” Drax said firmly. She looked at him and felt, for the first time, something that might be hope. “Tell me everything, and I will do what I can.”

She did.

“When Ego first went into the stars, he sought what he told you. But it was not enough. It was never enough. He wanted something more, he wanted power. He wanted to expand to cover the entire galaxy. He implanted bits of himself on hundreds of worlds, thousands of them. Hiding his seed in the very earth and within mortal women.”

“Like Meredith Quill,” Drax said, and she felt him drawing to a conclusion he wished he did not have such certainty was true.

“Yes. Many before Meredith Quill. And many after her as well. He would first collect his young himself, but that took too much time from his Expansion.”

Drax suppressed a shudder. “No good ever came of plans named in such a way.”

“No it has not. This is why even the one he hired to do the small part of his plan, Yondu Udonta, eventually turned from him, and he had to return to gathering his own children.”

“Why does he need them?” Drax asked. Mantis touched his arm to understand the look on his face, and received a sick feeling sitting in the gut, feeling similar to having eaten rotted food or consumed alcoholic drinks.

“He does not have the power to turn his seed within planets into himself. Not alone, but with another… with a child who has not failed to call forth the Light of the planet…”

“You mean with Peter Quill,” Drax said. “He means to use Peter Quill to power this mad plan, and
it will likely end in the death of my friend.”

Mantis looked sadly at him.

“He has already begun.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
Peter owns a grand total of two cassette tapes, I promise you, Gamora has heard all of these songs a dozen times at least. His informing her of the name of the singer is a way of saying "I need a reason to talk in code."

Harry Chapin sung "Cat's in the Cradle" a song about a man who neglects his relationship with his son until the day the kid turns around and builds a life without the father. It's a good song, one that carries many feelings about neglectful or absentee fathers, so one I feel Peter would have sung for Gamora. She's using it to say "Something is wrong with Ego."

My version of Peter has had enough strong women traipse through his head that he isn't going to pressure Gamora like canon Peter did. Instead, she's asking him what's with all that UST getting in the way of the mission, and he's letting her know she's in charge of their pace.

Cheers was a TV show about a bar, Sam and Diane were the main leads who spent most of the series dancing around their attraction.

People aren't pets. In the absence of a pre-negotiated and mutually enjoyable relationship dynamic, anyone considering themselves someone else's pet, toy, or possession, has probably experienced abuse from that person. Peter knows that, hence his reaction.

Skrulls are an extraterrestrial race in the Marvel Universe, shape shifters at war with the Kree. While their use of performance enhancing drugs is not canon, they are warlike enough to justify that headcanon.

Thanos is the creepy stalker of Death in the Marvel world, and he tends to send her "presents" in the form of dead people. He's the kind of messed up who would kill a gifted fighter just because they beat his champion.

Mantis in this story is one of Ego's children, who did not have access to The Light, but did have useful skills. He encourages her belief that she was adopted, because he thinks it make her grateful to him. As a result, via back-stopped headcanons, Ego also has empath abilities he uses to "express" his emotions by broadcasting them at others. This is how he convinced Peter to play along (that and Peter has his own ego problems) even though Peter was wise to the idea of danger. Mantis uses that and her own skills to keep track of Ego's progress on Peter's mind even when she can't feel Peter.

Drax's daughter Kamaria died, but in his sleepy state, he mistook Mantis for her.

Mantis displays several signs of abuse, including self-blame and a heightened fawn
response towards father figures. If you or a loved one is being abused, please seek help. www.thehotline.org is a good site to hook you up with assistance to get out of a bad situation.

Teaser:

“Peter Quill is not alone,” she told him, a feral smile warming her cheeks. “We will stop Ego.”
Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

The battle begins.

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nebula’s lungs burned as she sprinted beside her sister. Why they were running back into the home of the mad planet, she didn’t know, but Gamora refused to leave with her, and Nebula refused to leave without Gamora, so here they were.

She took a smug leaning position on a wall to catch her breath as Gamora, fearless and beautiful as always, sickeningly perfect, caught a woman up under her chin with one hand and began interrogating her.

“Gamora! That is enough!” the brute named Drax barked, uncommon concern in his eyes. “She has already told me everything.”

Gamora did not back down. Nebula could have told him not to waste his breath, Gamora never backed down.

“You are scared,” the woman in her sister’s grasp said, simple as a child discovering a new fact. Gamora slowly released her.

“I am.”

Those words rocked into Nebula like a cannon’s strike, like lightning and thunder made weapon. Gamora? Admitting to fear? “What did you do to my sister, Witch?” she demanded. “You will undo it, or taste your own blood.”

“Nebula, peace,” Gamora ordered, the steel in her voice as strong as ever. “You know why you came here, you know what we face. Mantis has done nothing to me a desire to live has not already done. But if she has betrayed Peter, I will ensure she dies on this rock before we are done.”

Drax moved between them. “Gamora! She is a child! Our first priority must be getting her to safety. Peter Quill would want that.”

“Peter’s an idiot who won’t admit what he wants!” Gamora snapped back at her friend. “Stop talking about him like he’s dead!”

“He has already been taken by Ego to begin the expansion,” Mantis told them, her voice trembling
but certain. "He will not come, you must go now!"

"Not without Peter!" Gamora shouted again. Nebula sensed allies and moved to touch her sister’s arm.

"Why not without Peter?" she asked, as gently as she could. This would hurt no matter how she did it, but she wanted her sister to survive it.

"He’s my friend! As much as Drax is, he’s my friend."

"All you’ve done is yell at Drax," Nebula said firmly. "All any of you do is yell at each other. You’re not friends."

"You’re right," Drax said, touching her arm. "We’re family. We leave no one behind."

Nebula sighed. "I’ll call Rocket."

Mantis fought to keep her balance as the emotions of those near her buffeted at the thin walls she used to keep from being hampered by her ability. These were not like Ego, who had emotions as light as silk and sharp as laszorwire. Drax and his sturdy firmament of honor and love, pain and purpose, was equally unlike to Gamora, bright and blinding in her need to see chains shatter. She was more alike to the newcomer, Nebula, both transforming weakness into fear, fear into anger, and then anger into something they could use. But where Gamora’s anger was built to defend, to protect her friends and parry an enemy, Nebula’s rage was a weapon, loaded, primed, and ready to destroy anything in her way. Gamora’s cold, implacable ice built a fortress of emotions around her heart, but Nebula submerged herself in a storm of fire so deeply it was hard to see where the hate and anger ended and the woman inside began.

It was in the face of this, that Mantis began her hardest task.

To influence Ego, without his awareness, without being seen by Peter.

Honestly, despite the fear she’d held for so long, Ego’s mind was easy to reach without his notice. The paths between her mind and his were well trod, her many hours helping him achieve a state unnatural to his kind becoming the guideposts to encouraging his truths to the surface.

Avoiding Peter was harder.

He was so close to Ego, the two almost merged. She could not touch Ego without also touching his son. It pained her to see the enmeshment of such light with such evil. Tears fell from her eyes as she recalled how Drax’s heart was also a mesh of love and pain. Tears formed in Peter’s eyes as well. That could work.

She thought of his friends, of his family, of the great love she felt when she touched him, and he interrupted Ego to ask about his friends. Ego dismissed those thoughts, his voice insinuating itself about Peter’s heart. She’d not seen it before, but Ego had a skill much like her own, influencing emotion. This was a battle to be fought between empaths, then. She reached out to touch Peter’s mind again.

WARM love HOPE please FAMILY courage

Mantis pulled back. Another was also doing as she. She smiled. Drax looked oddly at her.
“Peter Quill is not alone,” she told him, a feral smile warming her cheeks. “We will stop Ego.”

She reached again, for the mind on the other side of Peter’s, and sent a burst of encouragement and thanks. She received a flash of understanding, and a request. She put her power behind theirs, and shoved.

“You said you loved my mother,” Peter said. Now, now Mantis knew where to go.

She reached for Ego’s hubris and soothed away any thought of failure. He was supreme, he was triumphant. Peter would understand.

“That I did. My river lily, who knew the words to every song that came on the radio. I returned to earth to see her three times. I knew if I came back a fourth, I’d never leave. The Expansion, the reason for my very existence would be over. So I did what I had to do,” Ego’s voice broke as he felt actual pain for the first time in many years as Mantis vindictively pushed his memory back to that day, “but it broke my heart to put that tumor in her head.”

“What!?!” Peter’s emotions ripped away from Ego’s and Mantis gave the signal to Drax.

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On Earth, Sandra sat cross-legged in a dish-shaped chair in front of half a dozen computer screens. Each held a face, someone important that Darcy had called. She ignored them in favor of working to gain a foothold in Peter’s mind. Their door had been locked shut and even Jean wasn’t able to get through it. So far, Sandra had been able to change it from a vault to a hotel door, the kind with a chain latch, and prop it open. No switching, but she could shout across. Someone else was there, too. Not the bad guy, someone sneaky.

“There’s an anomalous growth outside St. Robert Missouri,” one of the important people reported. “A large, organic shape that appeared outside a Dairy Queen in... Devil’s Elbow?”

“Well, that’s fantastic,” Darcy sighed. “Jarvis, call Greg Quill and have him meet the evac teams to translate between jackboot and local.”

“Of course, Ma’am,” Jarvis replied. Sandra smiled, she liked Jarvis. “The President is asking if he should be here, or making a statement.”

“Tell Barack that we’re working to contain the threat, and if he can reduce panic, that would be great.”

“We have another ally on-planet, Darcy,” Sandra reported back to her cousin. “Unless Gamora learned telepathy. She’s helping me wedge in ideas.”

“Cool beans,” Darcy said, patting Sandra’s shoulder. “Just keep at him, kiddo.”

Sandra nodded and turned inward again, forcing a shoulder to the door separating her from him. Suddenly, the door vanished, and she was standing where Peter was, surrounded by tacky alien architecture.

A tall, creepy man with strangely shifting features was lecturing Peter on needing to grow up.

“What ever,” Sandra sighed, rolling her eyes. “Peter may have the maturity of your average high school quarterback, but you literally live in a shrine to your alien invasion glory days. News flash: the world isn’t a John Carpenter movie, and kids grow up to be different than their parents, you need to grow up and let go, you creepy Kurt Russell knock-off. It’s getting kinda pathetic.”
“I wanted to do this together,” Ego snarled. “But I suppose you’ll have to learn by spending the next thousand years as a battery, ‘Star-Lord’.”

His mocking tone set Sandra on edge and she was more than ready to tuck and roll away from the energy tentacle shot at her. She bounced up and spotted Gamora. She paused, unwilling to give away the assassin’s position, but desperately wanting back-up. The pause proved a mistake, as she was knocked back into her own body from behind.

“FUCK!” she shouted.

“Language, Sandra Diane Lee!” Darcy snapped, her brown eyes flaming with anger. “Your mother will have my hide if you come home from Xavier’s talking like that.”

“You swear,” Sandra pointed out petulantly.

“Your cousin is an officer in a global security agency,” some guy in a blue suit pointed out. Sandra rolled her eyes at him. “You’re a child. I’m not even pleased we have you here at all.”

“No offence, General Talbot,” Darcy said smoothly, and Sandra looked at her funny, “but I’ve learned we need every tool from the toolbox when push comes to shove. I know you’re not fond of using mutant assets, but push is shoving and Sandra stepped up.”

“Oh, I’m aware, Lieutenant Lewis. I’m aware.” He sighed and pinched his nose. Sandra recalled that facial expression was stress. “Her patriotism is noted, and appreciated. I’m just not comfortable with child soldiers, and I’d hope you wouldn’t be either.”

Sandra looked at Darcy as her cousin locked up in that fractional way that others found scary and Sandra found sad. She knew what was trying to be said, the words her cousin was swallowing. That she’d been a child soldier, that many of their family had been. That every woman who ever hurtled through time had been a soldier in a war for the very fabric of reality and they’d all gotten used to it long ago. Things it was too dangerous to say. Instead, Sandra reached out and took Darcy’s hand.

“General,” she said calmly, looking at the camera mounted above his image, knowing that would look more like she was looking him in the eye than if she looked at the screen. “I’m a mutant. Like it or not, all mutants end up child soldiers. We don’t want it, our teachers don’t want it, our families don’t want it, but as long as there’s a war on our very DNA, we’ll be soldiers when we’re called. That tends to happen at puberty, so if you’re that uncomfortable with child soldiers, maybe try a little harder to make the world safe for us to be kids in.”

“Well said, Tater-tot,” Darcy whispered. “Now go kick planetary butt.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Lazorwire: a fictional variant of razorwire, a thin, sharp strand of metal that cuts what it touches. Lazorwire is a mono-molecular gauge, high-strength alloy and cuts basically anything even remotely cut-able.
Jackboot: thug, usually a government one. What SHIELD was called by Selvig in Thor.
Have my hide: be exceptionally angry at me.
Tater-tot: Darcy's nickname for Sandra.
Notes:
Gamora in this canon has had some time to come to grips with her emotions, and knows very well she's scared. Nebula, however, is working off the old data from when Gamora didn't admit to emotions or weaknesses unless held at gunpoint.

Mantis' powers weren't really explained or explored in the movie, so I'm spitballing ideas here about how she senses people's emotions outside of when she touches them. I've decided it's more like background noise, hard to pin down, carrying prominent notes of tone and tendency (what people usually feel) but not giving her too many specifics unless she touches them.

Ego uses Mantis to help him sleep in the movie, which makes little sense if he's the god-like being he said he was. I prefer phenomenal-cosmic-power Ego, so I'm headcanoning that Celestials don't actually need sleep unless badly injured. Sleep is sort of like a drug (also, this explains the LSD trip he decorated with) and he uses Mantis to get it without excess effort. As a result, she's got a fantastic grasp of how to yank him about without him noticing due to his "tolerance" level.

Canon for Peter's hometown is scattered (closest was St. Charles Missouri, but that's not got the right flora for the alien plant scene) so I chose St. Robert and the small community of Devil's Elbow, so named for the river bend there.

After discussing it, ValkyriePhoenix and I decided that we'd retcon Barack Obama back into office until the 2016 election (I'd had Ellis in for him during IM3 due to feeling strange writing rpf, a feeling I got over) and then we'll have Ellis run on the Republican ticket to avoid any real-life politics spilling into fic-world.

Ego was played by Kurt Russell, famous for his roles in John Carpenter action flicks, and I couldn't resist the mention. Assume Sandra snuck a viewing and Peter hadn't due to being not old enough for violent action movies when kidnapped.

Child soldiers are indeed a Bad Thing that ethical military officers frown heavily on. Talbot is operating off of that knowledge and very distressed that Captain America has backed a woman who seems to be endorsing the use of mutant kids as soldiers. Sandra and Darcy know that neither of them is normal, and choices matter a lot more to the ethics of their situation, hence allowing Sandra to fight where she wants. Between those two sides is the very real fact that if you want a world without child soldiers, you need to make a world without conflicts that affect kids (or rather a world with no conflict, kids are everywhere), because everyone will fight if their lives depend on it.

Teaser:

Ego was just as terrifying and fearsome an opponent as he’d been before, but now, Yondu felt it maybe, just maybe, was possible to bring him down.
After all, he’d done gone pissed off a very deadly family.
Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

Taking the fight to Ego, part one

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Wynni, quadrad, Snowecat, Beth_Mac, Shadows_of_Shemai, ValkyriePhoenix, Joey99, Beacuzz, SionnachOiche3, Tsita, willowfire, Selene_Aduial, hhhellcat, Addie_Lover_of_Stories, and Matlida_Nicki! Y’all are awesome, keep it up.

Additionally, as a bit of news/housekeeping: Valky and I have decided we need an assistant to help us track timelines and such. If you’d be interested in the job, it pays in access to the google docs where we write things so you can see stuff before it’s released, and I’ll make a recurring assistant OC for you to help your fave character.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter was fighting furiously against his father’s overwhelming light when sudden, cool, blissful darkness descended on him. He looked up in the restful gloom, pinpointing Yondu by the gleam of metal-capped teeth.

“Hey there, Jackass.”

And with that, Yondu whistled the signal for ‘duck and run’, and Peter hit the ground as a lazer sliced through Ego like a particularly gruesome lightsaber.

“Whoo hoo! Ha! Thanks Yondu,” Peter called up to the smiling figure of the man who raised him. “You can tell me told you so later, I want to make sure Daddy Dearest is down for the count.”

“He is not,” Mantis said, helping Peter to stand. “That is only an extension of his true self. He will be back soon.”

“Then we should leave, quickly,” Nebula drawled from beside her sister. Peter blinked.

“What’s Smurfette doing here!?” He looked to Gamora for answers, at least to if she was happy about this or not. He wanted to set his reaction meter in the right place, shoot to kill or adopt, either way he didn’t care.

“Back rubs, dishes, killing gods... whatever I need to do to get a damn ride home.” Nebula quirked her face sort of like Gamora did sometimes when she…

“Hey! You made a joke!” Peter laughed, suffused with a warm, happy feeling. Somehow, he knew Nebula and Gamora were going to be alright, going to be sisters again. “That’s great, Gamora, look, your sister made a joke. Like an actual person, not a robot!”
“Please do not get her started,” Gamora sighed, fondness clear under the exasperation. From her tone this was normal, and Nebula must have a fondness for dry wit. Peter chalked it up to another win, and grinned at his gunner with what even he would admit was a dopey look. “Everyone into the drill, please, we need to get out of here.”

“Right, yeah. He’s got a core that can be killed, but it’s hidden deep. I’m not sure how to get at it.”

“The caverns,” Mantis said, lifting Rocket out of the pilot’s seat. “Pardon me, Puppy, it will be faster for me to fly us.”

“I’m not a dog!” Rocket snapped, snarling at her until Drax picked him up.

“Companion! We were worried about you,” Drax said, and Rocket ignored the out of character behavior to sink into the big man’s touch. “Groot is so much harder to keep alive without you.”

“I am GROOT!”

“Hush, lil buddy, this is for Rocket,” Peter told him, not questioning the knowledge that Groot meant to object to being called hard to keep alive. Groot looked at him with big wet eyes, and Peter tucked him into the collar of his coat. He did a quick double-check that his team, Yondu, and Nebula, had gotten on board, and took a seat at lazer control.

“Quill,” Yondu said with a nod as the module lifted up slightly while Mantis got a feel for the thrusters.

“Yondu,” Peter replied. This part was gonna suck. “I guess I should be glad I was a skinny kid. Otherwise you would have delivered me to this maniac.”

Yondu looked at him like he’d been slapped.

“You still reckon that’s the reason I kept you around?” Peter flinched from the pain in the old goat’s voice.

“No.” Peter looked at the targeting display with an undeserved intensity. “I did some thinking, and some remembering. Sandra brought in her teachers to help. I figure, you found out what Ego was doing, picked me up, and pulled a runner to prevent him doing it again.”

“Maybe to start with,” Yondu admitted. “But… you know there’s other reasons, right?”

“Ugh,” Nebula interrupted with a gagging sound. “All the feelings talk before battle. You people have issues.”

“Obviously,” Peter said as they zipped out of the palace and swerved to pass a glowing figure reconstructing itself into muscle and bone. “That’s my father, of course I have issues!”

Deep in the core of Ego’s planet, they found a mass of dense ore. The girl they’d called Mantis had pointed it out, but Rocket wasn’t sure even the heavy mining rig would cut through it before the rickety old generator gave out.

“We must hurry,” Mantis said. Her voice had the wavery quality Rocket tended to associate with the lab nurses and assistants, not the bad people with bad ideas writ large on the cosmos, but ones who helped them, to alleviate their own suffering, and who could be bargained with. “It will not take Ego long to find us.”
“Give Rocket the controls,” Quill ordered her. “He’s the best pilot in the galaxy, and I need this ship kept steady.”

Rocket tried not to preen at that casual admission, but it was hard. He and Quill had fought a lot in the early days about who was the better pilot. Rocket was more adaptable, he could fly anything he could boost, but Quill did know things about the Milano that nobody else did.

Rocks flew through the air, and tiny splats of molten metal hissed to cool on the exterior of the mining rig. A hole had been ripped in the side during their descent into the bowels of the planet, courtesy of an inexperienced pilot. Rocket chose not to point out that her flying had shortened the lifespan on their lasers, because it wouldn’t actually fix things and I-told-you-sos worked better after everyone had survived. You could lord it over live people. It wasn’t as satisfying to gloat at dead ones, so you had to keep your gloatees alive.

A harder task than he wanted to admit it was, especially when the crackling energy that made up Ego’s body started forming whip-like arms to slap at the rig.

“FUCK,” Rocket swore, swerving to one side as a lash missed the open wall by microns. “Okay, if you’re not helping fly or shoot, get off the boat. Try to keep him occupied.”

“Yondu, with me,” Peter ordered. “Gamora, on the lasers. Drax, you protect Mantis while she helps keep me from being mind-whammied. Nebula-”

“I will stay with my sister and the fox.”

“I’m not a fox!” Rocket snapped.

“I am Groot!” Groot supplied, trying to pass along the proper name for what Rocket used to be.

“I’m not a baboon, either,” Rocket told him.

“I am GROOT,” the twig corrected.

“Or a raccoon.”

“Then what are you?” asked Gamora’s sister with a sneer.

Rocket sighed. “I’m Rocket. I’m a gunner and a pilot and a Guardian of the Galaxy, and I’m really pissed off at this stupid planet. That’s what I am.”

“Good, now let us kill this thing.”

Killing was something they could agree on. This stupid rock needed to die, especially since although having the ship empty helped him keep level for Gamora to drill more, it also put Rocket’s friends in danger. Rocket didn’t like keeping his focus split.

“Grrrroooot,” Groot keened. The words beneath were still coming in, patches of baby-talk and random sentences in total grammatical perfection, but Rocket knew when he was being scolded.

“Hey, it’ll be okay,” he heard Nebula tell the little plant. “My sister is shooting him, and if there’s one thing she knows, it’s how to win. And not much else, in fact.”

“Heh, that’s Gamora,” Rocket answered.

“I can hear you, you know!” Gamora shot back, but Rocket smelled the faint sweet smell of pride coming over the general grease and filth of the pod’s interior.
They could do this.

They would do this.

Yeah.

Mantis struggled to keep her feet on the roiling surface of the core of the planet. Ego had never before been this angry. Even when his progeny failed him, he hadn’t had this choking fog of anger threatening to overwhelm her.

“I do not think I can do this,” she told Drax. The large man steadied her with a firm hand under her elbow.

“You don’t have to believe in yourself because I believe in you,” he said. “I will give you that feeling, and you will put Ego to sleep, as you have done before.”

Before Mantis could tell him that wasn’t how it worked, he moved his hand to her cheek. The fierce pride of a father, something she had never before felt, flooded her like a dam breaking. His faith steadied her shaking knees, his determination stiffened her spine. She looked in his eyes and, knowing what he meant, pulled. All that emotion, all the pain, the fear, the love, the hate, everything that made Drax who he was rushed into her and then out her feet into Ego.

Mantis turned to look at the battle, knelt slowly, and placed a hand on a tendril of energy that laced the floor like gruesome capillaries. She summoned all her power and pushed it into one word.

“SLEEP!”

Yondu looked at Peter, his boy, and then back at the crackling, shimmering ball of force that had helped make him. Ego was just as terrifying and fearsome an opponent as he’d been before, but now, Yondu felt it maybe, just maybe, was possible to bring him down.

After all, he’d done gone pissed off a very deadly family.

“So… how’s the crew?” Peter asked as they dodged streams of spitting energy.

“Recovering, better than if you’d let the mutiny happen, though. All the qualified leaders were on our side of the split.” Yondu looked at Peter’s pale face, noting the lines he hadn’t had time to see back on Contraxia. “Why’d’ya ask?”

“Ego has this power to mess with my head,” Peter said tersely. “Control what I feel, make bad ideas sound good. I need help thinking about why I’m fighting.”

Yondu rolled his eyes. If there was one thing Peter didn’t need help with, it was over thinkin’ things. “So…” Yondu cast about for anything to say to focus Peter on here, on now. “Why’d Ego want you here?”

Peter waved at the glowing crystal veins tracing the floor. “He needs my genetic connection to the light to help destroy the universe. He tried to teach me how to control the power, first. Maybe get me to do it for him, I guess.”

“So could you?”
“Sort of. I made a version of Steve’s shield. We played frisbee.”

“Seriously?” Yondu asked, blinking at Peter and nearly being crushed by a rock, before shaking himself out of the shock. Matter-making, light solid enough to touch and toss, and he could toss it, not just manifest it in his hands… it was impressive.

“I thought as hard as a could, that’s all I could come up with!” Peter defended, clearly having missed Yondu’s actual reason for pausing. “I’d like to see you think of better!”

“Thinking?” Yondu sighed, pushing down the thread of irritation he felt. It had no place here. “You think when I make this arrow fly I use my head?”

Peter looked at him and then the ground exploded.

<<

Nebula paced the tiny pod as her sister steadily drilled into the rock protecting their foe like some kind of demented mollusk. This delay, the division of their forces, it bothered her. Escape was the goal, but at this rate, they’d be lucky if they got out with only one fatality.

“Why are we even doing this?” she wondered aloud.

“WE Groot!” the little plant said firmly from her shoulder.

“He’s right, we’re doing it to save the galaxy,” Rocket said, translating for his friend without thinking. “Again. We’ll really be able to jack up our prices if we’re two-time galaxy savers.”

“I can’t believe that is where your mind goes,” Gamora said from the weapons bay. “We’ve had that talk. Many times.”

“I know, I know, there’s other reasons to save the galaxy. Of course I care about the planets, and the buildings, and all of the animals on the planets,” Rocket shot back.

"Grooooot!"

“And the plants, Groot, you know that.”

“What about the people?” Nebula asked.

“Meh,” Rocket shrugged, and she had to admit that was fair. Then the laser turned off and Gamora started swearing.

“Why aren’t you firing the laser?” Nebula demanded of her sister.

“I think Ego blew out the generator,” Gamora snarled. “There was a thump and then the equipment readings went off the charts, and then… nothing.”

“That’s not good,” Rocket said, dodging the ship around a tendril of rocky danger to get a better look. “Even if I rig a bomb, the metal is too thick. For it to work we’d actually need to place it on Ego’s core. And our fat butts ain’t gonna fit through those tiny holes.”

Nebula looked down at the small plant on her shoulder.

“No.” Rocket shook his head. “Bad plan. He does not touch my tech until he’s passed safety tests. He seriously could kill us all if we send him.”
“Well, we’re done for without the generator,” Gamora snapped. “We need to be able to kill him.”

Nebula sighed and flipped open a section of the dashboard, then the panel that covered the neural interface and it’s power core. This… was going to suck. “Give me a moment, I’ll get it back.”

“Are you sure?” Gamora asked.

Nebula ignored her and hooked her body to the ship, becoming it’s generator.

“This is gonna hurt,” Rocket warned, fingers light on the switch to change to the back-up, now her.

“Promises, promises,” she teased, letting the knife-edged ghost of a smile tilt her lips. Rocket grinned back in a way that showed more teeth than was polite on most planets, and flipped the switch.

Nebula had one moment to think he was right, it did suck, and then… nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Daddy Dearest: a play on the term Mommie Dearest, meaning abusive mother. (Trigger warnings on the biography of the same name.)
Smurfette: the only female smurf, a blue elf-like species in a childrens cartoon.
gloatees: people you gloat at.
capillaries: the tiny veins that carry blood through the surface of skin, most visible in the whites of eyes.

Notes:
The line about back rubs and dishes isn't mine, it was in the original script, although not in the final edit of the movie, which is a crime, as it is both comedy gold and also lets Nebula be more relatable.

Peter is currently riding the Empath Contact High and a little more open to emotions around him due to fighting beside Mantis in an empathic battle. So for the tense-nerds and fellow English majors; he's temporarily got a less-limited 3rd person PoV, sliding towards 3rd person omniscient.

Rocket rightly hates being mis-specied (called by the wrong species name), but given Mantis' overall innocence and lack of education, Drax intervenes with comfort contact to prevent a fight. Rocket accepts since Drax parses it as for his need, not Rocket's, and Peter helps Groot understand the polite fictions necessary. This emotional teamwork is basically why these guys are a good team.

Yondu and Peter still do have crap to work out, even if they're a LOT better in my canon at talking. Nebula though, is a pragmatist to the cybernetic core.

Despite hating being mis-specied, Rocket doesn't accept ”raccoon” as his species any more. It's better than the alternatives he's found so far, but he would prefer if species never came up at all.

Baby Groot is wisely not trusted with bombs in this one. Heads up, no Baby Groot's will
be forced into battle in my fics (at least as active participants, as ride-alongs, sure, but not as fighters).

Teaser:

“She means she wedged herself into an angle that snapped a few bones giving Groot a roll-cage,” Rocket supplied. “Remind me to make her a better gun.”
Chapter 82

Chapter Summary

The tides of battle turn, and turn again.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Beth_Mac, Tsita, Wynni, Snodove30, ValkyriePhoenix, quadrad, Shadoes_of_Shemai, willowfire, Selene_Aduial, Addie_Lover_of_Stories, SionnachOiche3, Matlida_Nicki, hhhellcat, and Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn for commenting last chapter.

Additionally, a huge shout out to the lovely Bodies Backup Team, Beth_Mac, Wynni, and Quadrad! They’ve been helping with the soon-to-come projects like an Official Bodies-Verse Family Tree, and keeping me from accidentally messing up the timeline so bad even the Line can’t protect it.

Their first rush of success couldn’t last. Yondu knew that. It didn’t keep him from feeling irritation with the cosmos as the tide turned and the ground rose to fight them. It particularly hurt to see the pained, pale, heartbreaking look on Peter’s face as Ego tossed a boulder directly at the rig and crushed it against the Core. Them girls and Rocket meant the world to Peter, what with how he tended to care most for the most broken. Not exactly the safest choice in their lives, but one that made Peter… Peter.

And Ego was going to die for exploiting that.

“Peter, Pete-boy,” Yondu snapped, shaking Peter from his shock verbally and with a hand on his shoulder. “You said you can use this guy’s own power against him?”

“I made a shield,” Peter said slowly. “I can’t. I can’t do that. It takes focus, and all I can think about now is how Gamora had something really important to… and we were gonna talk about… and now…”

Yondu personally didn’t believe Thanos could raise kids what could die from a rockslide, but Peter was deep in the pain now, and not ready to hear that.

“Think, think, think,” he said instead, catching a glare at his tone. “Ego done messed you up. When I use my arrow, I’m not thinking, I’m feeling. I fly it with my heart, boy, and you’ve got the biggest damn heart of anybody I ever met. Now what do you feel like doing?”

“I feel like it’s time to get a bigger hammer,” Peter growled, turning to glare at his father’s floating head projected in lightning and stone. “You really shouldn’t have done that, Ego.”

“I told you I don’t want to do this alone, Peter. They’re distractions, getting between us, between
you and your destiny, your power.”

Peter went still, his eyes glossing over with a sheen of space-deep, the not-color often described as black, that every spacer knew very well wasn’t black. Yondu shuddered as Peter’s face changed, subtly shifting as though he were trading places, but not to the familiar people who’d saved his life so many times. To something older, more alien. He lifted a hand to secure his headphones, something Peter had done a thousand times, but it looked wrong, too mechanically precise. Every line of Peter’s body was too solid, too controlled, the energy he’d always vented into expressive gestures and dance suddenly contained, compressed, a loaded weapon aiming directly at Ego.

“If you wanted to see my power, Father, you could have just asked me,” Peter said quietly, his voice unlike the boy Yondu had raised, not the whine of a child or the sass of a teen, not the cautious softness of the new leader unsure of his skill. It was low, and steady as bedrock. Yondu shuddered as Peter took a step forward. A wave of power ripped through the ground at his feet, lifting and covering Peter, as he built a ship-sized suit of armor from light, the small form of Peter’s physical body at its heart. A massive mallet, the brick-like head bearing sigils from out in far-Asgard, formed in his armored hand, and a circular shield covered in a star fit itself to his arm, like some warrior from old tales. Crackling whips of electricity sparked off the armor, the hammer, and the shield.

“For the Galaxy!” Peter yelled, slamming Ego with a powerful stroke of the hammer.

“This is for my siblings!” he roared, uppercutting with the edge of the shield.

“This is for Mantis!” he cried, spinning a back hand shot with the hammer.

“And this is for my family!” he howled, kicking Ego in the spectral teeth.

The air went still as Ego let the power forming his face dissipate, time slowing to a halt for a split second. Yondu stood transfixed, staring at Peter’s distant form, unable to run from the dropping dust and debris. Parts of Ego rained down, and all Yondu Udonta could think was…

 Damn I raised one good kid.

<^>

Peter felt. Yondu had asked him to feel, so he did. Normally, he tried not to feel in fights, they brought everything too close to the surface and he had no desire to punch people while simultaneously screaming and crying. But Yondu, the most emotionally repressed person in the universe, asked him to feel, and you just didn’t say no to that.

He felt pain. The sudden gaping loss of three-fifths of a family. The betrayal of someone who should have supported and loved him.

He felt sadness. The crushing ache that he’d been spawned not from a grand love story, but from a petty act of pragmatism. The weight of his walkman at his hip, a poor substitute for the woman who’d sung each and every song on the tapes for him.

He felt rage. The burning in his lungs as he held in a scream for Gamora and Rocket and Groot, knowing they wouldn’t hear it and Ego would use it. The twitching of fingers wanting a trigger under them and ammo in a chamber.

He felt… hope. Hope? What?

I’ve got you, Peter. Sandra smiled in his head, a ray of hope and love and kindness. Darcy wants you to stop on your way home and grab some nerve medication for Bucky from Dr. Kan-Dey.
I can do that. Peter blinked. They hadn’t been able to do that before. Not important. Battle, that was his job. He couldn’t do that as the tiny, insignificant flea Ego saw. But, he could be bigger.

“If you wanted to see my power, Father, you could have just asked me,” Peter said, pulling those feelings up and around him, guarding and protecting, armor like what Sandra’s Uncle Tony wore, his poster on her wall inspiring Peter’s position in the armor, a glowing beacon in the chest. Mjolnir, steady and strong as Thor showed him the proper swing, sprung into his mind, then to his hand in a rush of the pride he’d felt when Thor casually mentioned he’d like to see if Peter could lift the real thing. Steve’s shield followed in the determination that washed over him after the hammer’s appearance.

Peter donned the power of his family, and prepared for battle.

“For THE GALAXY!” he yelled, his own voice echoing back on him in flavors of Darcy, and Loki, and Thor.

“For my siblings!” he cried out, letting the pain of a thousand stillbirth relationships killed before they could happen fill his swing as he punched.

The pain eased a tiny fraction and he glanced down to where Drax was helping Mantis back to her feet. That she’d even tried to help move the mountain sitting on his chest spoke to how good she remained, in spite of being raised by Ego’s A+ parenting skills.

“This one’s for Mantis!” The slap of hammer on cheek sent a ripple through the power forming the armor, but the joy clear on Mantis’ face made that not matter. He took a step back, regaining his balance, and glanced at the Core, where the crumpled remains of the rig were still embedded.

Ego had made a fatal mistake.

“And this one’s for my family,” Peter growled, feeling the rage rumble in him like the start of a rockslide, an avalanche of anger hurtling inexorably down a slope, and directed it right into Ego’s stupid, smarmy, lying mouth via an armored boot to the head. Ego exploded into debris, and Peter rode his elation down to the ground.

“Yondu, did you see? Yondu?” Nothing. No joke on the comms, no shout from across the plain. No friendly headslap and lecture on caution.

“Peter!” Drax shouted, drawing Peter’s attention to where he was helping Mantis stand up. “We must go soon. The planet of your father is seeming increasingly unstable. Mantis cannot remain here.”

“I can still fight, still be of use,” the soft-spoken alien insisted, pushing Drax’s hand away as she stumbled towards Peter.

Peter nodded, looking around at the blasted landscape. He had the sinking feeling Drax was right, since Yondu hadn’t answered his shout or come running. That it was more important to focus on mitigating the damage that had been done to their little family.

“You can barely stand,” Drax chided Mantis as he caught her. He scooped her up into his arms with little protest from the empath, a troubling sign. “We have a responsibility to save who we can, Peter. I will go to the surface with Mantis. Please, do not linger.”

Drax was right, they’d already lost too many. But he had to at least try to evacuate his… his Yondu. The pain cut again, sharp and stinging, focusing him on his goal. “Take an aero rig to the surface. I know you don’t like wearing them, but it’s fastest. The Eclector should still be in orbit, signal with
your emergency transponder and get Mantis to safety.”

“You are a good man, Peter Quill,” Drax said solemnly. “I will write a song of your bravery here today. I might even dance.”

Peter laughed. “Please don’t.”

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Gamora woke from unconsciousness to the sound of screaming. She couldn’t make out the words, but the tone was Peter’s angry, frightful, I-thought-you-knew-better voice. The one that accompanied swift and decisive defense of any of the Guardians. The one she’d only heard directed at her once, after a two-day drinking binge finally overcame her resistance and she complained sloppily into Peter’s shoulder about being broken and monstrous.

“Somebody’s in trouble,” Rocket said in a sing-song tone of mockery, his sleepy reaction to the sound alerting her to the front half of the rig, tucked up against the edge of a rocky hollow illuminated by a misty blue light coming from a dozen small holes at her back.

“Rocket?” Gamora did a quick mental count of where she’d last seen everyone. “Where’s my sister and Groot?”

“I am here,” Nebula replied, voice monotone. “I am repairing. The twig is safe.”

“She means she wedged herself into an angle that snapped a few bones giving Groot a roll-cage,” Rocket supplied. “Remind me to make her a better gun.”

“Will do,” Gamora agreed, standing to pull Rocket free of the seat he was trapped in so he could help her shift the stone trapping Nebula and Groot. “But first, we need to get out of here, so we can help Peter fight Ego.”

“There is no point in fighting,” Nebula said as her limbs snapped and cracked back into somewhat normal shapes. “The lazer has been destroyed, we cannot kill the creature, so escape seems most advantageous.”

“I am GROOOOOOT!”

“He has a point,” Rocket said. “He needs to work on cleaning up his language, but he has a point.”

“Rocket,” Gamora sighed. “I was barely able to understand the adult version, I’m not yet to the point of deciphering the baby version.”

“I am Groot,” Groot protested, leaping to her shoulder from Nebulas.

“I’m sorry sweetie,” she cooed, and the little twig accepted a hug.

“He said we’re inside Ego’s brain. Or close enough. Let’s just kill the freaking thing now, and save some cleanup. Only he didn’t say ‘freaking’ and I want to have some strong discussions as a family about who’s been swearing in front of Groot.”

“Rocket…” Gamora didn’t want to say it, but she was vividly recalling a long session fixing up the Milano’s jump drives that involved more swears than half the space ports she’d been in. The source of Groot’s bad habit was the one asking about it. Instead, she refocused on the goal. “We don’t blow up things we’re standing on, remember?”
“That’s what timers are for. Timers and the power unit from a diluvian purple-core haptic system.”

Gamora contemplated that, decided she didn’t want to know, and nodded. Rocket’s hands blurred as he built a bomb from scraps of the rig, and she and Nebula put their backs to the task of clearing an escape route.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Spacer: someone who spends most their time in space, not on a planet. Like sailor was for oceans, only for space.
Pragmatism: relating to matters of fact or practical affairs often to the exclusion of intellectual or artistic matters. (Miriam Webster online)
Dr. Kan-Dey: Karmen Kan, Dey's wife from Xandar and a neuroscientist.
A+ parenting skills: sarcasm, here meaning the really fantastically bad methods of raising a child.
Roll-cage: a protective structure present in cars (and I'd assume space vehicles) to prevent the passengers from being squashed in event the vehicle rolls.

Notes:
Nobody dies. Well, Ego will, but nobody we like. I'm going to put them all through the wringer of THINKING the others died, but I'm not doing that to y'all. Nobody dies.

The same fight is covered from three PoV's, with changes, because of the relative positions of the PoV. Yondu, for instance, sees the hits, but not the rationale behind the battle cries, and Gamora can't hear the words, but knows the tone.

Sandra is acting casual, because she knows that's what he needs, someone to be his thinking for him. She's referencing errands to remind him he does still have some family, and he doesn't need to self-destruct in grief yet.

Peter separates his siblings who died before he met them from Mantis, due to not knowing the relationship. He does still consider her upbringing to be a reflection of Ego's parenting skills because frankly, having been brought as a baby to this planet means the only parent she had was Ego, and Peter knows that means he should have been a dad, even if Ego doesn't.

Rocket's perturbation over Groot's language is lifted from my Uncle Ralph, whose son cussed out his aunt during a diaper change, and Ralph, with no sense of irony, said "I don't know where he gets that fucking shit." (or something to the effect, each family member who's told me that story had a different version of swearing.)
Yondu will hear the Horns of Freedom if I have to steal every ship in both Orgord’s clans to earn it.
Chapter 83

Chapter Summary

The battle ends.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To ValkyriePhoenix, Tsita, biblioworm, Beth_Mac, Joey99, Shadows_of_Shemai, hhhellcat, and quadrad.

And once again to Team Bodies, you guys are awesome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kraglin had been waiting on tenterhooks by the communications station, far from his usual assigned location of the pilot’s seat. It didn’t matter, as the ship was holding a stable geosynchronous orbit and their autopilot may be the only thing Yondu bought brand new, but it was still strange. For him, and every other Ravager.

He still had to do it.

The Cap’n was counting on him to lead, to put their people where they needed to be.

That meant hearing the signals.

“Come in Yondu’s Ship! Come in, Yondu’s Ship!” the radio squawked.

“This is the Eclector,” Kraglin yelped into the receiver. “Who are you and where are you?”

“I am Drax, the Destroyer, companion of Peter Quill. This planet is very unstable and we need to evacuate.”

Kraglin looked at the screen. Their orbit point wasn’t far off from the place the signal was coming from. “Jafir, Tullk, take your M-Ships down and pull survivors.” He swallowed hard.

“Drax, we’ve got a team ready to evacuate you, and anyone you have with you. What’s the status of the others?”

“Peter Quill was alive when I last saw him.”

No.

Not okay.

Not in any way acceptable.

“Yondu?” Kraglin asked, voice cracking on the pain. “What about the Cap’n?”
There was a long pause.

“Peter Quill went back to look for him.”

Coldness, the thick, slow coldness of void, slipped into Kraglin’s soul. The soothing dark of space-deep and the pinprick light of star fire washed away the pain as Kraglin slowly turned off all his non-essential feelings. It’d kick him in the teeth later, but sometimes being wired strange got you some useful perks. “Okay, Drax. We’ll be pulling you out of there real soon. Stay put, and keep your transmitter going.”

“Krams?” Oblo asked, nervously fingerling the beads in his beard like good luck charms. “You gon’ be alright?”

Kraglin blinked at the com-tech. He stood from the seat and gestured that the other man should sit. “Call Stakar. And Aleta. Call all of them.”

“Kraglin…” Whatever Oblo was planning to say got lost as Kraglin looked through him.

“Call. Them,” Kraglin repeated, feeling the harsh drop of inflection on his tongue. “I don’t care what oaths were made, what judgments passed. Yondu will hear the Horns of Freedom if I have to steal every ship in both Orgord’s clans to earn it. You get the other captains on the line, and I’ll tell ‘em so myself.”

“Aye-aye… Captain.”

Kraglin nodded and stalked off to the small office Yondu had kept off the front quadrants’ main room. He could have a little privacy there while he twisted the arms or equivalent anatomy of the most feared outlaws space had to offer.

Yondu would get a funeral.

<^>

Yondu had one thought, and that was that he’d damn well better get a week of trouble free relaxation somewhere with pretty girls and nice drinks after this was over.

Being pinned by a boulder to a floor that was rapidly changing from sandstone to quicksand was certainly not what he signed up for when he decided he wasn’t going to let Ego get away with making a fool of Yondu Udonta. He heard Peter calling his name, but it was so hard to muster the strength to call back.

Not impossible to whistle, though.

“Yondu! There’s his arrow!” Peter shouted. Yondu licked his lips and traced a path of sound and light to circle his position. “I’m coming Yondu!”

A great booming laugh rocked the ground, and Yondu felt himself tossed up, up, up into the unforgiving air of the cavern, far enough he got a long second to contemplate the hot needles pricking his right leg and the cold streak of piss down his left, before falling again. Spotting Peter as he hit the apex of his rag-doll-like flight, Yondu whistled sharply and snapped up the comforting yaka shaft as it passed, using the arrow’s power pulling up to slow the losing fight with gravity his body seemed caught in.

“Peter! Heads up!” Yondu shouted, and Peter looked up and smothered a laugh. Yondu glared at him.
“I’m sorry, it’s just… you looked like Mary Poppins.”

Yondu considered that as he floated lower. “That a good thing?”

Peter smiled, one of those great big, blooming flower on his face smiles, that made the whole galaxy a happier place. “That’s the best thing.”

“Cool, I’m Mary Poppins!”

Of course, since Yondu Udonta was not allowed to have nice things by whatever cosmic entity dictated the fair punishments for horrible people, the next second was blinding agony as his feet touched down and his spine made a grating sound he could near about hear. Peter cried out in dismay, catching Yondu up about the arms and back, lifting him so the weight wasn’t so crushing.

“We’ve gotta get you out of here.”

Then Ego was there, large as life and just as annoying.

<^> “You cannot deny the purpose the universe has bestowed upon you!” Ego crowed. Peter leveled an evil eye at him, feeling a bit like someone had dropped fish guts down his shirt again. That had been one of the worst in the Guardians last prank war. “You are one in a billion, a trillion, maybe even more! And I’m offering you the galaxy on a plate because of it. What greater meaning could life possibly have to offer?”

“I was born by the river in a little tent,” Peter began to sing. Hey, it’d worked last time. “Oh and just like the river I’ve been running ev’r since.”

“What?” Ego looked confused. Peter smiled. This was a song Ego hadn’t heard, hadn’t cared to hear. This was the song Meredith Quill, a girl who’d answered to River Lily, sang to her son on nights when the world was too big, too scary, for the two outcasts.

“It’s been a long time, a long time coming, but I know a change gonna come, oh yes it will,” Yondu sang, because this was also a song Peter Quill, a child of rivers and stars, had sung in the big pile of Ravagers in the middle of the night when nobody wanted to sleep alone and they fell where they sat during drinking and tale-telling.

“It’s been too hard living, but I’m afraid to die,” Peter joined back in. “‘Cause I don't know what's up there, beyond the sky.”

A light gathered at their feet, and Peter let the feeling of Yondu in his arms, of Ego’s smug face looking lost and confused, of the memory of Gamora learning to sing it too, wash over him. No ideas, no plans, not even twelve percent of a plan, just feeling as the light bore him up, lifting him away from Ego. A loud crash sounded, and Peter looked to the core, where a chunk of rock had been brushed aside by the movement of his wave of power, and Gamora stood, holding Nebula in a mirror of his own stance with Yondu.

“Are you seriously singing... again ?!” she shouted at him. Peter laughed, held out a hand, and sent them a stairway of light that rippled with color as the two women climbed it. Rocket and Groot followed swiftly after, the bomb-maker slapping aero-rigs and space suits into people’s hands.

“You’re gonna want to brace yourself,” he told Peter.

“What?”
The core exploded.

Gamora had shifted most of the smaller rocks and metal shards of the rig to the side, trying to give Nebula space to work as her repairs continued. They were both accustomed to the wet crack and pop sound that came moments before a spasm would rock Nebula’s body as things realigned. It was best dealt with by ignoring it, but staying far enough back that an arm in the midst of realignment didn’t hit a solid object… like Gamora.

“So…” she said, trying to find the right words. “You know Rocket’s adopted you, right?”

“What,” her sister asked flatly.

“He doesn’t build guns for just anyone.” Gamora looked at her sister. “You saved Groot.”

“The plant doesn’t need to get shattered,” Nebula said, her attempt at nonchalance ruined by the crackle of her clavicle reforming. They both knew what wasn’t being said. That Nebula had been shattered long ago, when she didn’t need it, and she wasn’t letting that happen to Groot.

“You saved a child,” Gamora said again, “and now his very talented, exceptionally brutal, not-entirely-sane caretaker is going to upgrade every one of your weapons without warning every few weeks.”

“What’s your point?” Nebula grunted, wedging a long strut of metal into a crack at the base of the rocks.

“You’re not Thanos’ little girl anymore,” Gamora said with the ghost of a smile haunting her lips. “You did something kind for someone who cannot repay you, and you’re reaping the benefits. That’s what I did, how I escaped.”

“You escaped by betraying an employer and getting arrested.”

“Do you really think I was free then?” Gamora stopped to look dubiously at her sister. “That I had escaped? I was more trapped then than I have ever been.”

Nebula cocked her head.

“I was alone,” Gamora explained. “I was alone and making bad choices and the only person I’d ever loved shot my ship, looted my corpse, and left me for dead.”

“That was intended as a mercy,” Nebula interrupted.

“I know that! But I was alone. That loneliness was worse than all the years of imprisonment. I almost wanted it back, Nebula. I wanted Thanos to come and make it better again, to hurt me and punish me, but at least he’d see me.” Gamora swallowed hard. “But I’d been kind to Groot without need once or twice. And Peter risked his life and his freedom to get me to a ship. And Drax risked everything to aim a gun at said ship and demand my freedom, and Rocket was the one who gave him that gun. My family here is built on risking everything to repay what wasn’t seen as a debt.”

“And now….”

“Welcome to the family, Taco Night is once every seven cycles and the chore wheel is the only law we won’t break,” Rocket said, handing Gamora the sleeping form of Groot. “He’s finally down for a nap, and I need a few minutes of total focus to get us a lead-time.”
“Okay, I think we can get this moved if Nebula and I both work the lever. At the least we can loosen it, and ride the back-blow away from the explosion.”

“You people are crazy,” Nebula said again. This time, it didn’t sound like a complaint. There was even a hint of a smile as the rock finally shifted in time to be moved aside by the rising wave of light lifting Peter and Yondu towards the surface.

Peter was singing again, and Gamora couldn’t help but smile fondly at him. If Peter was singing, they’d be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Waiting on tenterhooks: to wait nervously.
Horns of Freedom: reference to a Ravager funeral.

Notes:
I headcanon Kraglin as neuro-divergent, because I can. His ability to turn off the emotions holding him back from functioning (although at a steep price in the form of a hangover) comes from that, and is actually based on several neuro-divergent people I know in RL.

Stakar and Aleta are an estranged husband-wife duo that used to run a combined Ravager Clan, that broke up at some point. Both have the last name Orgord, and both were involved in exiling Yondu. However, both are about to get a very nasty phone call demanding they cut that shit out and come pay respects, and Angry Kraglin is scary as fuck.

Yondu, for those wondering about the injuries, has an incomplete spinal injury resulting in anterior cord syndrome, which messes with sensations of touch, pain, and temperature. Most anterior cord injury survivors can recover some movement, but the whole sporadic pain thing is going to make adaptive devices a part of Yondu's future.

Peter is singing "A Change Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke. Listen to it here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEBlOmoKV4

Teaser:

“Verily, this road of rainbows shall not best me! I am of Asgard, I’ve ridden on roads of real rainbow light.”
Chapter 84

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of battles and Halloween celebrations.

Chapter Notes


CONTENT WARNING: The fourth section is heavy on feels, and touches on attempted suicide (both recent from a minor character, and long ago from two major characters), terminal illness, and feeling broken. It's not essential to the plot, but it has some nice emotional character development. Please consider your headspace before reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy watched as Sandra shuddered in her seat, the rounded edges of the papasan chair making it too hard to fall out of, a critical protection for someone who was going somewhere gravity may or may not be a large acting force.

“How’s it going, kiddo?” she asked, as Sandra opened her eyes. The reports certainly showed it going well, the organic mass was inert now, and teams were already clearing it away. Greg Quill had gotten a team of local boys with more energy than sense deputized, and that had sped things up considerably. She was actually considering asking Bob and Mayhue if they’d want to go into the academy, they may not have degrees of any kind, but they’d figured out the gunk was susceptible to one of the active ingredients of Windex without much prompting.

“They’re out, and they’re safe,” Sandra said with a yawn. “And I spent so much time leaning on that door, trying to get through, that I think I dented the wall in my brain. I need a nap.”

“You go take it, Tater-tot,” Darcy told her, kissing her cousin’s head as she passed. Then she turned to the assembled Generals, and squared her shoulders. “Alright, gentlemen and ladies. I’m recommending that we downgrade the threat level. Our best source of off-planet intel believes this is over for now, and heightened alert levels don’t serve any purpose but panic.”

“Are you absolutely sure about this?” General Hale asked. Darcy looked at her. It was a strange question. “That girl is barely older than my daughter. It’s… hard, not to want to double check her work.”

Darcy knew that feel. She’d had the same panic after coming back to herself from the Red Room. Heck, she had it over Maya. “I understand, General. But we currently don’t have the resources to contact any of the other planets affected, because currently, our only allies in space are Nine-Realms worlds. If Sandra can convince our allies to come to Earth, we may be able to start a foothold in the
galactic community, which is only to the better, but until then…”

“We have to take her word for it,” General Talbot filled in. She liked him, he was the old guard and didn’t trust new ideas that well, but he did admit when he’d fucked up. Darcy smiled.

“Exactly. Although, in my final report to the president, I’m going to recommend forming a group tasked with extra-terrestrial diplomacy and defence,” Darcy said. She looked at the faces, noted a spark, and smiled at Hale. “Perhaps you’d like that job, General Hale. You’ve got the Airforce training to back you up on a space mission. I think you’d get on well with Nova Prime, our ally on Xandar.”

“Entirely understood,” Darcy said. After that, there were the general statements, the reiteration of the vital secrecy involved, and the faces around her blinked out. Darcy popped her back and left the War Room.

“Peanut butter sandwich?” Tony offered. She turned to see him holding out a plate with two sandwiches, one excessively heavy on the nut butter, with the edge of a banana slice sticking out. “You need to eat.”

“I do,” she agreed, taking the one meant for her. “You’re getting good at the support side of things. I wouldn’t have thought it when we met.”

“When we met, I was still trying to save the world with only my suits and Jarvis,” Tony sighed. “It was a nasty, self-destructive cycle, and it took Pepper beating me up with superpowers to break it. Not everyone is going to work for all jobs. Some of us are wrenches and shouldn’t try to be screwdrivers, and some of us are swiss army knives and need to stretch the ol’ corkscrew now and then.”

“Your metaphors are getting better too,” she commented around a mouthful of nuts and banana.

“Jane’s teaching me,” he replied brightly. “Speaking of, Jane wanted to know if she can borrow you to bounce ideas off of later. Well, right now, but it’s one am and I’m the only one who’s allowed to be up doing science at the moment.”

“It’s one in the morning?” Darcy asked, finally looking out the windows at the night skyline. “And, no Tony. You are not allowed to do midnight science.”

“It’s my tower!”

“It has our name on it, so there! Now go to bed!”

<^>

The Tower was getting over the sudden and stressful re-emergence of a galactic threat when Steve walked in to the common room, set down a large bag on the coffee table in front of Clint and Thor, and glared them into silence.

“What gives, we were playing!”

“Verily, this road of rainbows shall not best me! I am of Asgard, I’ve ridden on roads of real rainbow light.”
“The Mario Kart match can happen at any time,” Steve said, looking at them. “Halloween happens once a year.”


Thor looked puzzled. Steve decided to take mercy on both of them. “We’re not patrolling, or working with SHIELD, or anything like that. We’re hosting a bunch of kids from local pediatric wards for trick-or-treat and a Halloween party. Because everyone deserves a chance to dress up and collect candy and have fun, even if they’re sick.”

Thor brightened. He liked anything that involved kids. Clint even started to look a little happier. Natasha scoffed from the breakfast bar, but Bucky chose that moment to walk in with his own large bags.

“Pauk, I want to make one room a giant spider nest, come help me get the webs stretched out.”

“Papaaa,” Natasha whined. “Why? Halloween is awful, we always end up doing things like fight guys who call themselves ‘Mr. Whiz’ or ‘Material Man’ and I ruin a good pair of shoes.”

“If you don’t want whack-a-do duty, you’ll help with the decorations,” Darcy said, waltzing in with a huge binder. “I got Fury to officially list you as active duty that night, protecting the Tower’s children’s event. If you don’t help though, you go back in the available agent pool.”

Clint bounced up, waving his hands. “Me, me! I want to be out of the available agent pool! Please let me help!”

Darcy handed him the binder. “That’s a comprehensive list of possible recipes for Halloween themed snacks and drinks that won’t interact with any of the kids medicines or special diets. I had the hospitals pool their recipes, and I looked up options for spookify-ing them from Casey’s big book of creative things for family holidays. Have fun planning the menus!”

Thor stood and looked at Steve, who had been watching his loves creatively co-opt the reluctant agents into helping. “What can I do to help?”

“I need to fill these plastic cauldrons with candy, and put them by the door of each room that’ll be a trick-or-treat stop. I’ve also got two pallets of pumpkins we’ll need to carve, and a crate of turnips.”

“Turnips?” Tony asked, wandering in with Bruce. “What’s with turnips?”

“They’re an older tradition,” Darcy filled in. “And they’re spooky as fuck. Turnip flesh is mostly translucent, which means it glows more or less, depending on how deep the wall between the light and the outside is. I’m going to be trying food colors on mine, make them into like, floating spirit balls like in that one movie.”

“Okay, you referenced Brave,” Clint said, his face still buried in the binder. “If I weren’t already in, I’d be in now.”

“Umm,” Bruce said, looking at all of them. “I think I’m going to tap out on the night of and let Hulk handle that. He actually likes kids.”

“You like our kids,” Darcy said, looking hurt. “They’re yours too.”

“Our kids are weirdos,” Bruce said firmly. “That makes them okay. I know the stuff they’ve gone through and what they need, because it’s basically what I would have wanted. Normal people have normal children who want and need normal things, and I don’t understand any of that. I’m always
scared I’m going to break one. Hulk, on the other hand, likes making friends his own age who aren’t family. It’s hard to do that.”

“Fair enough,” Steve said, stepping in before anything could escalate. Bruce had done so well with Hulk, that even if he wasn’t going to do a family event, Steve thought it was progress. “Would Hulk want to help decorate?”

Bruce blinked slowly like a cat, his eyes shifting green for a moment.

“We’ll be in Hulk’s room with the art supplies if you need us,” Bruce said, snagging Tony’s sleeve.

The night of Halloween was cold and a bit damp, but fortunately the weather didn’t look like it was going to snow. Natasha spent five minutes comforting Sharon and refusing to trade duty when it turned out some asshole with temperature control powers was burying Chicago in snow and calling himself “Jacky Frosting”, and Clint sent a passive-aggressive picture of the nice warm common room in its party glory to Sitwell.

Thor was on the balcony, where Tony had rigged up a mad science lab right from an old Bela Lugosi film, prepared to bring down carefully aimed lightning on cue. Hulk was in the Asym Warfare Gym, aka the Jungle Gym, ready to help kids find their way through Betty’s Hansel and Gretel themed maze. Sam, Hill, Maya, and Loki were manning candy distribution points with the assistance of Tony’s bot-kids and a few of Darcy’s Minions. The rest of the Avengers were in the lobby of the building, waiting to meet the kids they’d be guiding through Trick-or-Treat.

Except Bucky.

Bucky was still getting his trick done.

“We all good Jarvis?” he asked his co-conspirator.

“Indeed, Sergeant Barnes. All is ready, prepared, set, good to go.”

“Did Tony change your sarcasm settings?”

“I’m quite sure I don’t know what you mean.” Jarvis let a small puff of air out a vent, a small, barely audible laugh. “I must say, Sergeant, I am however enjoying this particular prank.”

“I thought you might.”

“Shall we watch?”

Screens flicked on in the control center, washing the small room in blue light as Bucky surveyed each room with his people in it. Another camera turned on, tracking the first of the hospital vans to drive up. Nurses and parents helped costumed children out of the seats, and walked into the Avenger’s Tower.

Steve was the first to get caught, a little scrappy girl in patriotic gear that was maybe a bit too accurate asked shyly to hold his hand. He complimented her shield and she turned as red as the stripes over her ribs.

Next Clint was cornered by a girl in her late tweens, wearing a purple catsuit with one arm cut to make room for her cast as she demanded to know his training schedule. Her bow wasn’t a prop.
Darcy almost missed her doppleganger, he was so quiet and sneaky. At first glance, he almost looked more like a SHIELD agent, and Bucky made a note to talk to the designer who’d handled that costume. Darcy’s suit had plenty of memorable details you could fit around leg braces.

The team and the kids worked their way upstairs, stopping at candy doors and knocking politely. Loki nearly fell over in shock, even though he didn’t show it, at the ten-year-old Salvadoran-American twins who’d chosen coordinating costumes, green and black faux suede, and blue paint with fake ice covering the feeding port and insulin pump. Sam scooped his own mini me up from his wheelchair after asking, and gave him a quick falcon-back ride. Honestly, the kid probably weighed less than the first EXO unit had.

Finally, Avenger and mini-Avenger were all gathered in the common room, eating and watching Tony and Thor put on a dramatic reenactment of famous and obscure sci-fi scenes. Bucky slipped out of the control room, through the web maze he’d built with his daughter and equipped with remote control spiders he’d built with his son.

“Oh no you don’t,” Darcy said, stopping him with a mock glare. “I just had a very interesting discussion with Helen about some calls you asked her to make. You think you’re funny, don’tcha?”

“A bit,” Bucky admitted. “Hey, I didn’t make any kid wear one who didn’t already want to dress as that person. That’s how Hill got missed, because she’s admin.”

“There were three secret agents, I’m sure Maria will survive,” Darcy said. “I also had a talk with Helen about the call she made on her own recognizance. Meet Rebecca.”

She stepped to the side and revealed a girl, about 7 or 8, in a stunning miniature replica of his suit, down to the metal cladding on the arm. Actually, the arm itself looked… real.

“Hi sweetheart,” he said, feeling his heart choke up into his throat. He had no idea what to say. Suddenly the joke he’d pulled on the others seemed less funny.

“Hi! I’m Rebecca and I’m 9. I have a little brother named Jake who wants to be Captain America, but I prefer you! You’re not silly because you don’t wear bright colors like you wanna get shot at.” She grinned, and pulled her own hand off. “I’ve already got the cool robot arm!”

“Doll,” Bucky said to Darcy, “you’re replacing me on the team?”

Rebecca laughed, and grabbed their hands, dragging them to the snack table. “I want the bone cakes!” she cackled. “And then we can watch the science show!”

Tony paused as something caught his eye off to the side. Over by the window where he’d displayed Hulk’s first crayon stained glass was a boy maybe 8 years old, who appeared to be dressed as both Hulk and Bruce, rumpled plaid shirt and purple pants, glasses and green makeup. For some reason, he appeared to be on the verge of tears as he reached out to pet the artwork, and Tony’s heart stopped as he saw the bandages on the boy’s wrists. He knew those, a little too well.

“Hi, what’s your name?” He asked cheerfully.

“Billy,” the boy replied cautiously.

“I see you like the artwork, Billy, would you like to meet the artist?”

Billy paused a moment, then shook his head sadly, “…No, I don’t want to be a bother to someone
important like that.”

“Nope. Nothin doin,” Tony insisted firmly, “Hulk will be most displeased if he doesn’t get to meet his minime.”

“Hulk? Hulk made this?”

“Yup. Something about crayons still being useful even if they’re broken, just like all of us. You too. Come on. I’ll take you to him.”

Billy nodded in awe and followed Tony to the Asym Gym.

“Hulk! I brought you a surprise!” Tony called, and out from under a bridge coated in fake peppermints, emerged Hulk, with red and white stripes painted on his arms. He’d wanted to be a “peppermint troll” for some reason. Nobody argued, it was cute, anyway.

“Surprise?” Hulk looked down. “Fren?”

“Yup, this is Billy. He liked your art.” Tony didn’t quite know what to say. He knew there was something Hulk needed to tell this kid, but he didn’t know what or how to get them there. “The broken crayon one, in the window.”

“You broken too?”

“No.” Billy said flatly. “I’m not.”

“You from fixing place, though.”

“I have cancer. Cancer’s not like a broken bone. I’m not going to get better, I’m going to die. I’m just going to do so so slowly that I drag everybody else down with me.”

Hulk screwed up his face and Tony prayed he hadn’t fucked up. Nobody would ever forgive him if he’d brought the only child in the building who could make Hulk cry right to him. “Bad thought,” Hulk said. “Hulk seen that. Hulk remember that before make the broken art. Hulk had to save Banner, because Banner couldn’t save Banner. Bad thought is wrong, is lie.”

“I’m not lying!”

“No, not you. Bad thought say, ‘you not important, you break things, you hurt people’ because bad thought lies. Banner think bad thought. But Banner wrong. If Banner right, no Hulk, no save Funny Tony when he fall down from big hole. No go save Betty with friends. No friends. Banner and Bad Thought are wrong.”


“Help Hulk fix,” Hulk said. “Hulk bump candy part, need to put back on. Big fingers not good for fix. You have little fingers, you fix.”

Billy looked up at where the candy had fallen from, “I can’t reach it, it’s too high up.”

“Climb Hulk. Hulk good ladder, not let you fall.”

Tony choked back tears and went back to the party. Hulk had this.
Translations:
Papasan chair: a round, dish or cup-shaped chair.
Windex: a brand of window cleaner, and a staple of Redneck Science.
Road of rainbows: the Rainbow Road level of Mario Kart.
Whack-a-do: crazy person.

Notes:
Bob and Mayhue are based on acquaintances of my family, specifically the self-titled "redneck" half of my family. They're smart, but not in the way colleges want, and they've got the risk-assessment of your average Academy student, so they'll fit right in. Mayhue decided to use Windex because his secret favorite movie is My Big Fat Greek Wedding, where Windex is the miracle fix.

Potential spoilers for the current season of Agents of SHIELD, but I love General Hale and her weird-ass motivations and history, so I brought her over.

Tony may have been the big, active-duty superhero when the team got together, but he's starting to prefer acting as backup, and is perhaps working towards retiring from active duty entirely, because it's hard on his system. I'm not planning to ever kill Tony in this series, but if it should come about that he's not available in the canon anymore (I don't trust the Russos not to kill my babies) I'll just have him retire to the support team.

Clint and Natasha hate Halloween because that's when the low-level crazy villain types come out in droves, and their jobs have usually placed them fighting the third-stringers along with all the other SHIELD agents. They don't dislike it on general principle, just the fact that it's traditionally a rough night.

Turnips are fun to carve, and they do glow eerily. I recommend trying it sometime, especially if you use LED tea lights.

Hulk likes Art, it's one of his favorite play activities. He's also an accomplished artist, there's a short about him discovering this skill in Code Chartreuse, where we see the creation of the mentioned stained glass crayon work.

Halloween 2014 had one of the worst snowstorms to hit Chicago in recent years, here that's due to a not-so-super villain using Ice Powers.

Clint's doppleganger is Kate Bishop. She was in the hospital for orthopedic surgery after a really bad arm break from falling off a building practicing parkour. Felt you oughta know.

Tony, after his parent's first death, grappled with a LOT of mental health issues, including cutting, before settling on alcohol abuse as his self-harm of choice, so he knows the type/location of bandages for a suicide attempt. He's less aware of the right way to handle those emotions in others, and that Hulk has the highest EQ on the team (and is a survivor of Bruce's suicide attempt).

Suicidal ideation (thinking about suicide or death, without actually acting on it) is fairly common in patients with terminal illness, but Hulk is RIGHT. The bad thought is a lying liar who lies, and it's important to give yourself compassion, to care for your own
wants and needs, because your friends don't want you gone, even if the bad thought says so. If you have struggles with suicidal ideation, please seek help. Most ERs will help get you to somewhere that can help if you walk in and report a fear that you're a danger to yourself. You never know who needs you to be their hero, but you can start by being your own.

Teaser:

"I could have just asked our hackers to point your spy satellites away the same as the civilian monitored ones, but I don’t want to have to keep my wife from murdering a trigger happy missile jock.”
Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

Darcy panics as children are lost, Bucky welcomes one more parent home, and Steve helps get the children back safely.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! This one got an awesome showing in the comments, so it's for ValkyriePhoenix, Beacuzz, quadrad, Shadows_of_Shemai, Joey99, Tsita, Wynni, FantasyTLOU, willowfire, SnowDove30, Beth_Mac, Selene_Aduial, SionnachOiche3, Notashamed, Readertree, ClockWeasel, hhhellcat, Banmosi, LenaNectaris, Masquaradebelle, and Addie_Lover_of_Stories!

At this juncture I point you towards Body of Code, the story of chaos mages in Spaaa-aa-aace! (ten points if you heard that in the appropriate B-movie warble) It covers all of the things that happen off-planet in this chapter, and will cover the things that happen involving off-planet people immediately after this chapter, and this story will mostly gloss over it so we don't retread old ground. (With more focus on the politics of space-pirate tourists, as opposed to "Fix The Damage" efforts towards the more banged-up Guardians, which is all in Body of Code.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy smiled as the quinjet lifted off from SHIELD’s London base. For all Loki’s departure to find and help Sif contain the Aether had her worried, it had been nice to stop off at Monty’s place, and to catch up with Lizzie and Kate. Thanksgiving season wasn’t exactly a thing for her European friends and family, but she still liked checking in on them as she looked over her lists for holiday cards.

“Ma’am,” her pilot-du-jour interrupted her thoughts. Today she’d netted Warren, which was awesome, as he was hilarious. “We have a secure communication from your husband.”

“What one?” Darcy asked, before shaking her head. “Nevermind, put it through.”

“Darcy?” Steve asked, panic tingling his voice. “Are the Twins with you?”

“No, I thought they were with you?” She started doing the logistics in her head of babysitting the twin terrors. “Is Little with you?”

“I thought Little was going to stay at the Embassy with the staff looking out for her…” Steve’s voice trailed off. “We’ve been had.”

Darcy blinked. Now that she was thinking about it, the arrangements for the children had been much more sloppily done than normal, and there’d been two sets of agreements for where they’d stay while Ciara and Loki were both off working, one for the Embassy, and one for the Tower. Somehow, and she highly suspected mages, everyone had been convinced someone else was watching the Trio of
“Steve… we were supposed to watch Gun while Loki is in space and Hogun and Jianne are on their second honeymoon.”

“FUCK!” Steve yelled, and there was a sharp clatter noise. “Sorry Jane, I’ll be quiet.”

“What did she throw?” Warren asked.

“Rubik’s cube,” Steve answered.

“Okay, honey,” Darcy soothed before another tangent could pop up. “I’m coming home as fast as the quinjet can go, we know they’re not at the Tower or the Embassy, because that’s where they’re supposed to be, so you and Clint call the grandparents and Tatni, see if we can figure out where on earth they went.”

“…Angel, I think you’re overlooking the obvious.”

Darcy blinked again. “Say what now?”

“Darcy… they’re not on Earth,” Steve explained. “They went with Loki.”

“With Loki.”

“Yup.”

“Into outer space.”

“Yup.”

“Loki, who is going to chase down a deadly, body-snatching rock that has a genocidal maniac after it.”

“That’s the one.”

“Ciara’s gonna murder-kill us.”

Steve laughed. “Yeah, that she is. At least it’ll be faster than if Jianne gets us?”

“It’s been an honor serving with you, Captain, Lieutenant,” Warren said from the cockpit. “I’ll be sure to say something moving at the funeral.”

“Shut up, Peace,” Darcy snapped. “Okay, Steve, we’ve got to live, just so this ass doesn’t make a scene. Ask Bucky to get the good chocolate on standby, and call Natasha. Unless she’s literally tied to a chair, I want her on the next flight home so she can help buffer the rage.”

“Um.” There was the sound of ruffling paper as Steve clearly was looking through his notebook of family plans. “And if she is tied to a chair?”

“Then she may take the redeye so she can sleep off the ligature marks.”

“Got it.” Steve sighed. “Not what I pictured, way back when, Angel.”
“I pictured you dead in an icy grave,” Darcy pointed out. “This is better.”

“That it is,” Steve agreed, and Warren cut the link with a gagging noise.

“Sorry, must have hit some interference,” he said, not sorry at all.

Bucky was waiting at the Triskellion’s tarmac for the incoming plane carrying the VIP it’d taken months to get out when he got the call from Steve telling him the kids had run off. He agreed to handle it, called in a favor with Lillian From Accounting to arrange for the bribe chocolate to be waiting, and squared up in time to see a large man walk down a gangway.

“Barra MacBain, I presume?” Bucky asked, sticking out his metal hand. With the windchill in DC, both had gloves on, and he was testing synth-skin this month for Tony, so the arm looked normal. When Barra hesitated, Bucky noted the cuffs. He shot a glare at the transporting agent, and the cuffs came off so Barra could shake.

“And who may you be?”

“Sergeant James Barnes, my friends call me Bucky,” he replied with a smile. He shifted it slightly, adding a knife edge as he tightened his grip into something maybe two psi short of crushing bone. “And everyone who ever even looked wrong at Ciara Harrow’s boys gets to die calling me Winter Soldier.”

Barra paled, probably due to the vice grip, so Bucky let up. He released the larger man’s hand with a sunny grin, allowing the wind to blow away the threats he’d just made. They worked, no need to let them hang on the air.

“It’s true, then? Ciara has children?” Barra asked, his voice cracking on the words. Bucky slung his flesh arm about the man’s shoulders and guided him inside. Clearly the exit briefing hadn’t been at all thorough.

“Let’s back up a step, okay?” Bucky asked as they stepped into the building. He signalled a transport agent to find them a place to talk, and followed the man to a side office. “Have a seat, and tell me what they told you when you were released.”

“That someone had worked off my debts to society, and that I was being released on parole. Also, that strings had been pulled, and someone in SHIELD is a nepotistic son of a bitch and possibly ‘pussy whipped’ to boot,” Barra said, his sneer and the air quotes making it clear he didn’t think much of whoever had said the latter.

“I’m gonna want names, later,” Bucky growled, but he focused on the task at hand. “So, there’s been some big events since you were locked up, and we’re going to need to put effort in to catching you up on the times. First of all, aliens, totally real, nobody is denying they exist, especially after attacking New York and London. Two different sets, by the way. We’re allied with the Royal family of Asgard, too, and your family has been using some… unique skillsets on behalf of my family, and that’s how we got you released.”

“They what.” Barra’s face was stony and dark.

“They offered to help out when a friend was captured by someone your brother Roy worked for. My wife doesn’t forget that sort of thing, so she started double checking exactly how life-long your life sentence was, which Roy felt the need to repay, and when her sister ended up in danger during SquidGate, he helped. It’s been snowballing ever since then.”
“Squid… Gate?”

Bucky slapped his head. “Right. Yeah, Hydra, from World War Two? Not dead. Also, Captain America? Not dead either. He and I have what you’d call ... objections to the continued existence of those squid-faced fucks, so we went after them. Hard. It involved releasing a bunch of sensitive information onto the internet, and the resulting scandal got nicknamed SquidGate.”

Barra blinked as he processed that. When he looked ready, Bucky continued.

“Also, I’d need to double check, honestly, they were supposed to do this at the prison, but does the name Tony Stark ring a bell?”

“I was an arms dealer,” Barra said dryly. “I know who the Starks are. I never bought direct from their man, if that’s what you’re asking. He reeked of traitor, and I didn’t live free as long as I did by ignoring my nose.”

“Right. This is going to be a shocker,” Bucky muttered before shaking his head. Someone was getting fired for this. “Tony doesn’t make weapons anymore, Stane is dead, and Stark Industries is now famous for two things, sustainable energy and the fancy flying suit of armor Tony fights supervillains and aliens in, called Iron Man. Alongside Stark Industries new CEO Pepper Potts, my husband, aka Captain America, a giant green strongman named Hulk, the crown Prince of Asgard, and some assorted spysassins including my wife, my daughter, and my son-in-law, he’s an Avenger, and we kinda save the world a lot, in between babysitting your children.”

There was a long pause.

“So the pictures Roy sent me were real, and the boys… they’re mine?”

Bucky laughed. Of course that was the man’s takeaway from that entire thing.

“It’s true. And between alien invasions and babysitting, I honestly think the aliens are less hazardous. The twins traumatized our robot butler.”

“...How does one traumatize a robot? Who even has a robot butler?”

“Stark. And they took paint bomb marbles into the air vents and uncovered holes in the security system that wouldn’t matter under any other circumstances.”

“How is that traumatizing?”

“It was a lot of holes.” Bucky paused. “And his body is sort of the building? Have you ever seen that one show with the magic bus and the teacher with no sense of age-appropriate activities or self-preservation?”

“Aye.”

“It’s the episode where they go into Ralphie’s body when he’s sick, except Jarvis wasn’t sick, and he’s got both a full awareness of his body and a limited ability to forget things.”

“Ah.”

“Anyway, now that the worst shocks are out of the way, we need to get you settled. Because of how you were released, and who you’re related to, we can’t just drop you off and expect you to figure it out. I arranged a safe house adjoining the property of the boy’s adopted Uncle Clint, Roy should be there, he stocked it with food and clothes you’d like. You’re not on house arrest, but to be
safe, we arranged for some protection the first few weeks while you scout the area, and Billy’ll run errands for you if needed. Although I may call you in a bit to help save me from Ciara.”

“What’s gettin’ ye in trouble?”

“Your boys may have, uh…” Bucky paused, measured the danger, and decided the potential ally was worth it. “Stowed away with Loki of Asgard on a space-voyage?”

Steve sighed, and looked at the screens filled with various Generals. Darcy was handling landing arrangements assuming he’d be able to clear a flight path, and the various hackers of the family were already preparing to shift satellite coverage so the public wouldn’t panic, but all that was useless if he couldn’t talk trigger happy militaries out of shooting first and asking questions later.

“Look, you know me, you know my work,” he began, putting his hands up in supplication. “I’ve fought both major off-world incursions, I’d say I’m pretty trustworthy about who the bad aliens are. The ones asking to land are not the bad aliens, I’d really rather you not shoot them.”

“Captain, with all due respect,” began a stuffy sounding French General, “having fought aliens is no basis for inviting them to stay for dinner.”

“That’s fair, General Artois, but as a counterpoint, I’m also the in-law of alien royalty. Loki and Thor are technically aliens, for all they were once considered gods.”

“This is not Loki or Thor!” burst out German General Baumgart. “This is some strange ship, hovering where we cannot reach, asking to fly over our countries!”

“Well, we personally know some of the people on that ship, four of them were born on Earth, and as you say, they’re asking. If they can ask, then they’re polite. If they’re polite, I’m willing to let them take a crack at diplomacy, before we turn this into full on war with the Nova Empire, a war we won’t win.”

There was a silence. General Hale cleared her throat. “If I may, Captain. The Nova Empire is a large galactic power recently recovering from the ended war with the Kree. Some of the passengers on that ship are Nova citizens, and others are hailed as war heroes, from the dossier that the Sentient World Observation and Response Department has been able to put together, thanks to the cooperation of the Captain’s family.”

“And when was the United States going to tell the rest of us they had an alien branch of their army?” sniffed the British General. Steve rolled his eyes.

“Oh like any of you talk about the work that goes on in Cardiff or with Wisdom’s people. We all have secrets, I’d just prefer mine not end with you shooting a ship returning human children out of the sky. I could have just asked our hackers to point your spy satellites away the same as the civilian monitored ones, but I don’t want to have to keep my wife from murdering a trigger happy missile jock.”

A new screen blinked on in the last minutes.

“This is why Darcy Lewis told Doom you are not to lead during civil discussion,” Victor commented with a laugh. “You do lack the diplomatic touch.”

“I don’t like bullies,” Steve said bluntly, knowing the masked dictator preferred that side of him. “I don’t care where they’re from or where they work. And I’ve said several times now, there are
children on that ship. Children. We’re letting them land, or we become the bullies, not letting children have a safe place on our shores. Our proposed landing path only has them crossing Greenland and Canada, before landing in Upstate New York. Seriously, most of you shouldn’t even need to know this stuff, but Darcy has you on our list of people to call when we invite interstellar guests. Which, if I might add, we look pretty unwelcoming to at the moment, since we did ask them to bring the children home and they have, and now we’re considering killing them for the favor. I mean, I knew people held some strange ideas about immigrants, I was two years late to be born Irish, but this is a little ridiculous.”

The assembled Generals looked awkwardly anywhere but the screens in front of them, and Doom laughed.

“They may land, Doom has no objections to who American citizens invite to their homes, as long as they do not enter Latverian soil.”

It seemed nobody wanted to be the person on the call who was MORE aggressive and crazy than Victor Von Doom, so the affirmatives trickled in, and people signed off. Soon, it was just Steve, Victor, and Hale.

“Thank you, both,” Steve said, honestly grateful. “I’ve got to go get the jet ready to transport the people we want to bring into the Tower, but please, do keep in touch.”

“Of course, I look forward to hearing of the children’s escapades over brunch,” Victor said, nodding.

“I want all the details you can get from the spacecraft’s crew,” Hale said briskly. “Their insight will be critical in helping SWORD develop a first-contact policy.”

Steve smiled. “Of course, General Hale. We’ll send a full debrief when we have it.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
pilot-du-jour: pilot of the day
been had: been fooled or tricked
VIP: usually stands for very important person, here actually stands for very important prisoner
psi: pounds per square inch, a measure of pressure
'pussy whipped': a vulgar term for being controlled by a woman
Cardiff: the Torchwood Institute does exist in this 'verse, as Britain's version of SHIELD/SWORD
missile jock: missile jocky, the person who fires missiles

Notes:
Lizzie and Kate are Elizabeth Windsor and Kate Middleton-Windsor (I know she doesn't hyphenate, it's for ease of identification) who Darcy befriended in WWII and after the Battle of Greenwich, respectively.

The missing children plotline is covered over in Body of Code, I'm not redoing it here, so just go read that and come back afterward.
The grandparents are the team from RED, plus Fury and Peggy Carter-Jones. Tatni is the wife of the head of the Bratva, the Russian Mob. Their contacts with the children are covered in Code Chartreuse.

Barra MacBain is the twins father, and a creation of ValkyriePhoenix. He's been in SHEILDRA custody since shortly after his capture and the twin's birth (about concurrent with their first day of daycare, Hydra decided working on MacBain DNA was a stellar idea. Wonder why? Anyway, while he's had proof of his children shown to him, he's also been subject to ~5 years of solid gaslighting and torture at this point and isn't sure Ciara a) actually had children or if that was a lie, b) had his children or if that was a lie, or c) can be trusted not to shoot him on sight. He's also reasonably wary of Bucky and all of SHIELD, since they only got him out after the Strucker cell of SHEILDRA escaped notice during SquidGate, which he was aware of in the panicked moving of the dungeon he was in.

Billy is a kid who spends his time out of college with the bikers of the town where Clint has a farmhouse for Laura and Barney. He's seen in Out Of Body Experience.

General Hale has been given control of SWORD, the off-world version of SHIELD, designed to protect Earth from extraterrestrial threats. She was shown in Agents of SHIELD to have wanted to be an astronaut as a child, although instead she ended up in the air force. She's a childhood friend of Sitwell, which is how Darcy met her, and Darcy was the one who recommended the assignment.

Steve has ALL the immigrant salt. All of it. And he's not afraid to remind people of their ugly pasts in WWII (Britain and the US turned away lots of refugees before and after joining the war) in order to get them to listen.

Victor Von Doom carefully cultivates a particular "mad dog" reputation for defensive purposes, namely keeping anyone from looking too closely at the solarpunk underpinnings of seemingly feudal Latvaria. Here he's using it on behalf of a friend, but that's also defensive. He's not actually very aggressive if you look solely at facts.

Teaser:

For one, it seemed Space Hookers were commonly equipped to deal with infringement of their boundaries via warning shots.
Chapter 86

Chapter Summary

Recovery from several major life events is never easy. Especially with the Avengers.

Chapter Notes

LOVE FEST!!! To Shadows_of_Shemai, Wynni, Tsita, Joey99, Notashamed, quadrad, ClockWeasel, hhhellocat, Readertee, SionnachOiche3, willowfire, Selene_Aduial, and as always, my beloved ValkyriePhoenix.

ATTENTION: the side work Bodies of Code is now up and covering the things that happen either right after the last chapter or during the first section of this one. It has much fluff and crack, but be aware it ALSO has a ton of triggers surrounding the fact that Little/Lava has a backstory of pain and horribleness and we need the heroes to know about that so they can go curbstomp evil in the face with extreme prejudice. It's clearly labeled where the awful is if you feel up to working around that, or you can read the parts in space and then nope back over here as soon as they land. Curate your media experience responsibly, dear ones.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy was glad to have the children back, and exceedingly glad that the family was now large enough that she, personally, didn’t have to be the boots on the ground at the fights that came after. Or at least, not at all of them. She took a sort of vicious pride in shutting down at least a few of the bastards who’d been brought to her attention by her niece. Little, now going by Lava, deserved that sort of reaction, if nothing else. But it was nice to be able to tag team the awful that came out of those revelations.

That the Guardians were staying for a bit was also welcome news, because she got to actually hug and fuss over the people she’d been wanting to mother for months. The Ravager crew was even relatively calm, especially since they’d already developed an etiquette code for a person who was also a structure before ever meeting Jarvis. After a few days, she’d managed to get them calm enough to go out for karaoke, and then after that, to a strip club owned by one of Natasha’s friends.

To say the reactions were unbelievable was generous.

For one, it seemed Space Hookers were commonly equipped to deal with infringement of their boundaries via warning shots. As a result, her piratical charges were exceptionally polite when requesting things like private dances. For another, despite the overall cleanliness level or lack thereof in the Eclector, all the Ravagers seemed reluctant to put something as dirty as cash into anyone’s clothes, which resulted in several polite negotiations with frustrated dancers who couldn’t hold that much in their hands without losing their hard-earned grace, and an eventual trip to a nice stationary store in Chinatown to buy pretty envelopes to hold their donations, paid for from the sale of a few harmless space toys to Stark Industries for reverse engineering.
It also turned out that Jafir adored classical Chinese Theater, and there was a showing of The Orphan of Zhao he just had to see. Which meant getting all the Ravagers who wanted to go proper opera clothes, and tickets, and reassuring the theater manager that no, these aliens are nice, and like watching plays. Afterward, more discoveries were made in the gastronomical department, as Tullk declared the noodle and dumpling shop they ate at equal to any on his home planet. The quiet and somewhat indifferent Baker 7 agreed, since his species ate minerals and petroleum products, and the proprietor had scavenged up a few bracelets of semi-precious stone to toss in sriracha. Darcy made a note, and the group agreed upon a 500% tip.

Holidays in New York City were always a bustle and this year was no different. Of course, her normal problems were more focused on arranging presents for all the children she was still in contact with and keeping Tony and Bruce from going too far off the deep end with their stress science, and less on avoiding interstellar diplomatic incidents, but that was fine. The Eclector’s crew seemed reasonably respectful of local customs, aside from offering to rough up some rude clients at their favorite skin bars for being jerks to the ladies. They even got on well with the men General Hale sent over to talk to them about SWORD. A few of those officers requested, and got, leave to actually go with the Ravagers, in a short term officer exchange. The Ravagers left Jafir and the affable Tullk to the inquisitive questions of the various scientists working with Hale and Victoria Hand. Kraglin left them some schematics for the tools needed to build a proper station-base that wouldn’t be laughed out of the galactic community, and Darcy called it good as the more complicated parties left, promising to write back frequently. Peter and his team sort of semi-moved in to the upstate training base, but she could tell they were getting antsy to leave after Christmas Day ended in a very quiet family spat while the toddler tree-ling slept off his massive meal. They all agreed that it might be best if they left after New Years was over, and the goodbyes were tear-soaked, but loving.

For once, it actually seemed like the world might be giving her family a break.

Then, of course, the world seemed to go to shit.

Because of course that was her luck.

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Steve honestly hadn’t been paying much attention, which is why it stung so bad when he found out that Matt had been playing vigilante. Not because he disagreed with that choice, he wasn’t that much of a hypocrite, but because he suddenly had to face the fact he’d been relaxing on top of a literal tower while people were being hurt.

And that he couldn’t exactly stop doing that now.

“Daaarcy!” he whined.

“Steeve,” she retorted. “No. I know you want to, but our flashy side can’t get involved. I mean, we’re cutting it close with letting the spysassins play, but for one, Bucky and Tasha both have a direct family bond involved, and two, they’re trained in not being seen for who they are. Do you know what happens if Captain America goes to beat up mob bosses?”

“The mob stops being a problem?” he guessed hopefully, but with little actual optimism.

“No, but nice try.” She smiled, and gestured for him to sit on the lover’s chair Bucky had given them for the holidays. “What happens is, at first, yeah, you punch the problem until it stops being problematic. Then, the press reports on it. Then, the people we haven’t gotten out of the public eye, because they’re not actually, technically speaking, Hydra, just not exactly opposed in general, spin it. ‘Sentinel of Liberty or Common Thug?’ and ‘Exactly Who Is He Avenging?’ become headlines.
Concerned citizens get rounded up into extremist groups on Facebook because one time one person was caught in the crossfire, and it stops mattering who was in the right, because what matters more is their own personal peace. People get radicalized against anyone with powers. Mobs, lynchings, property destruction and terror tactics, and none of it will hit us until we’re way too late to stop it, because we’re too far from where the problem starts.

“You’re describing Germany,” Steve said quietly. “Darcy, we’re not in Germany.”

“You think it can’t happen here?” she snapped. He watched her pull herself together, dozens of tiny efforts, each a labor of Heracles. “You think it isn’t happening here? Zoe and Harley tell me that Xavier’s emergency enrollments doubled between when they enrolled and when Sandra did. Morita and Katenka are reporting increased white pride activity online. There was a threat called in at Bubbie’s old synagogue a month ago! It’s happening again, Steve. I’m saying this as someone who dedicated her life to seeing the patterns and getting ahead of the problem. As someone who’s very much at risk if I can’t. It is happening again.”

“So what do we do?” he asked, keeping his voice as gentle as he dared. “I’m with you, Darce, forever and always, just tell me what we do.”

“We stay out of Matt’s way,” Darcy said firmly, her eyes sparkling as she shored herself up against some invisible storm. “We let the people already working the problem have room to work it, we watch Thomas when they ask, and we make damn sure we’ve got the credibility we need when it’s time to stand in the way of the madness.”

Steve nodded. He could do that, and Darcy knew what she was talking about. He’d listened to her in those things back when he was a dancing monkey, he could listen to her now. That master’s degree was worth it.

It still ached, deep and bitter, when they were invited in. He’d love to volunteer to take the risks, to keep his nephew from becoming an orphan, again. He’d choose to shield his family any day, but he had to let Skye and Matt do this on their own.

Reading about the newly christened Daredevil in the Bulletin while drinking his gourmet coffee overlooking the city, however, just reinforced the trapped feeling. It was a lovely golden cage, but it was still a cage. Looking over at Darcy helping Bucky make pages for Matt’s Hero Scrapbook, though, he decided he could tolerate it.

He’d had worse.

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Bucky was hanging out in the common room of the tower with Thomas, the cute kid his sister had adopted, when Tony, looking pale and drawn interrupted the game of Tsuro of the Seas they’d started with Jarvis.

“Bucky… You’ll need to hear this.”

Bucky stood up and glanced at the camera next to the projector Jarvis was using to indicate his moves. “Can you dead-hand for me?”

“Of course Sergeant Barnes.”

Tony led him into the smaller media room they used for movie nights and motioned to sit. Bucky looked at him warily, but sat. “So, um. I need you to help me with something. It’s not a good something, and I don’t want to have to make you do this, but uh…”
“But you’re clearly not okay and you’re asking for help,” Bucky said firmly. “That’s a good step, Tony. What can I do?”

“Aunt Peggy just had a stroke,” Tony said flatly. The pain was partially buried under a bluntness so extreme that had Tony not prefaced the entire talk with his discomfort, it would seem glib or unconcerned. “She’s getting up there, totally normal for any woman of her years to have occasional blips on the health chart. It wasn’t even that bad, minor, even. The doctors say she’ll be barking orders at us again in no time.”

“Tony.” Tony looked up into Bucky’s eyes and the tears caught on his lashes sparkled like cut glass, sharp and fragile. Bucky opened his arms in invitation as Tony warred with his own need for comfort. “C’mere brat.”

Suddenly a heroic, intelligent, full grown man threw himself into the metal-armed embrace of one of the most feared assassins in history like a five year old child with a nightmare. Bucky brushed Tony’s hair and murmured to him softly in Russian.

“I need you to tell Steve and Darcy,” Tony mumbled into Bucky’s shirt. “I can’t look them in the eye and tell them that. I can’t.”

“I can do that, Tony,” Bucky said softly to Tony’s hair. He wondered what it would have been like, if he and Steve had been there with Peggy. Had watched Maria drag Howard out of his decadent hermitage of science and emotionless fun. Had seen Tony as a child, been Uncles to him. Had gotten to give him the comfort and support he had so clearly needed from a father who wasn’t the most available man in the world even before he repressed his War days into fruitless searching and the bottom of a bottle.

Had been old by the time Darcy was meeting them.

Maybe not.

Tony dragged himself together bit by bit, before pulling away and nodding sharply. His exit was at a half run, fleeing like he hadn’t seemed to need to do in a long time. Bucky waited to give him a lead, then went to track down his loves.

“Steve?” he called at the door of their suite. “You in here?”

“Kitchen!” Steve called. “You’re just in time, I need help with the plumbing and I can’t call maintenance.”

“Why not?” Bucky asked, rounding the corner into their spacious kitchen to see Steve menacing the sink drain with a wire hanger. “Woah, woah, what’s happening?”

“My wedding ring slipped off while I was washing the lettuce and I am not serving dinner to our wife without it on my hand.” Steve held up the hanger, bent into a diamond with the hook on one end. “But I’m really bad at fishing.”

Bucky laughed. “I’ll pull the trap and get the ring back, Steve, don’t worry. Now sit down, I’ve got some bad news.”

“What bad news?” Darcy asked, coming in from her office. “It better not be that dinner is burned, I’m starving and cannot be held liable for my actions if I get hangry.”

“Bandaid off quick?” Bucky asked. They sobered and nodded. “Peggy had a stroke. The doctors say it’s minor and she’ll recover, but Tony is walking wounded from it so I’m not sure what that
means for the short term prognosis.”

“If I may,” Jarvis interjected politely, “I have had time to review Mrs. Jones file and I have more information, if you’d like it.”

“Yes, please,” Steve said, and the same time Darcy snapped “Intel, now.”

“Mrs. Jones had a relatively small clot in her brain that caused a transient ischemic attack, commonly called a mini stroke. It presented at first as a headache, followed by dizziness. Although she did not want to seek medical care at first, Donna Triplett called an ambulance when she lost her balance and fell. Her only lasting symptoms so far are dysphasia and a black eye where she hit her head on something. The doctors haven’t noted her as concussed, though.”

“So she’ll survive, but she’s got a hard time with words for the moment?” Darcy asked, seeming happy about that, but Steve was frowning.

“Jarvis… did Howard have dysphasia as a symptom when he and Tony reunited?”

“Indeed, Captain.”

Darcy blinked. Bucky took in her mental journey, written in small twitches of her forehead, and followed along as well. “Well shit, no wonder he’s walking wounded,” she concluded. “How do we even start to fix this?”

“First, I fix the sink, and Steve dishes up dinner, then we can figure out a plan to help Tony cope,” Bucky told her. “People don’t think as well on an empty stomach, and you run much closer to empty in the evenings. We’ll survive this.”

“We will,” Darcy agreed. “Jarvis, can you tell Thomas it’s dinner time and make sure he washes up before he comes to sit at the table?”

“Of course, ma’am,” Jarvis agreed. “Would you mind verbally telling me it’s dinner and you aren’t taking calls? There’s a very persistent man calling for you who doesn’t seem to grasp the finer points of phone etiquette. If I can replay a command, he may stop harassing me.”

“Yeah, but who is it?” Darcy asked.

“A Hank Pym,” Jarvis said, sounding as disapproving as he could.

“Tell Hank to call back during standard business hours, on the East coast, mind you, unless it’s an emergency. And he knows damn well if it’s an emergency, he’s supposed to contact me through the network Katenka and Morita set up anyway. If he doesn’t stop, hang up on him. He can be a dick, you don’t have to put up with that.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Gastronomical: related to food or eating
Sriracha: a hot sauce popular in many Asian cuisines
Skin Bars: drinking establishments with waitresses/hostesses that wear very little. No nudity, but bikini tops are common.
Dead-hand: as a noun, a hand in poker that cannot win, as a verb (as seen here) to run
another player's turns to prevent the game from becoming unbalanced due to a dropout.

Hangry: the volatile combination of hunger and anger, often the anger arising from the hunger

Walking wounded: not down with the injury, still technically functional, but needs care sooner rather than later

Notes:
Most of the Post-Return shenanigans and drama happen over in Bodies of Code. Assume that everything that just got glossed over will be either covered there or set up to happen off-screen there. If you have triggers or PTSD you may want to avoid the drama/plot aspects of that story, and you can skip it entirely if you need.

The Ravager Crew that helped return the kidlets stayed at the upstate training facility (the one they use after Age of Ultron in canon) and Jarvis was explained to them as being like an organic ship, one with the building. As such, trashing the place is, per Ravager code, akin to assault and can get you severely reprimanded.

Natasha has many friends scattered throughout various fields, one of whom was a sex worker until she had to retire for medical reasons and used her savings to start a dancer-owned strip club with incredibly exacting standards for the patrons and a fair and equitable pay scale (unlike many clubs, the Chandelier Club pays an hourly wage to its dancers, plus they keep their tips.)

Given the wide range of biologies in space, it's hard to tell what will be cross-transmittable. As such, even in the sex industry, it's unthinkable for anyone from off-planet to put something un-sanitized into contact with someone's orifices. Given that the usual place for a stripper to accept their tips is the underwear/bra, and that folding money can't be effectively washed, the Ravager crew won't do that. Fortunately, it's common in China to distribute gifts of money in fancy envelopes, usually red for luck, called Red Money. Usually used for holidays and birthday gifts, it's also used for gratuity for people who work in a service industry; e.g. someone who cleans your laundry, or house, on a regular basis.

Considering the Ravager tastes and their opinion that sex work is a service industry, it fits, and New York has a large Chinatown area to buy the red envelopes in. (Shout-out to Maharet for the extra info on Chinese money-gifting!)

Tsuro of the Seas is a path-making game with an Eastern Dragon aesthetic. The original Tsuro is a favorite of mine, but I had them play Tsuro of the Seas because it uses a slightly more complex system, and one of the players is a supercomputer.

Tony's coping tools involve distancing himself from his emotions with snark and sass, which to the uninitiated can seem cold or cruel. Steve in canon certainly makes that mistake, but here everyone is more in touch with each other than that, so Bucky gives him the outlets he needs and doesn't call attention after it's over.

If you ever lose something important down a sink drain, turn off the water, remove the P-trap (it looks like the letter P) and you'll find the lost item in the loop bit. Menacing your plumbing with hooks is for people who never learned home maintenance.

Bandaid off quick is code for "do you want the bad news given blunt and fast" because many people prefer to rip adhesive bandages off their skin in one fast tug that hurts a lot but for a short time, as opposed to picking at it slow and for a long time.
Stroke symptoms can be mild, especially for TIAs, or ministrokes. However, since TIAs and strokes look nearly the same from the layperson's perspective, and 1 in 3 TIA victims will later have a full stroke, it's VERY important to get care fast. Symptoms can include vision changes, dysphasia (trouble speaking), confusion, balance issues, tingling, an altered level of consciousness, dizziness, passing out, an abnormal sense of taste, an abnormal sense of smell, and weakness or numbness on just one side of the body or face. Call 911 (or applicable emergency service for your area) or go to the emergency room if you’re having any of these symptoms, and encourage anyone reporting these symptoms to you to do the same.

Teaser:

“No crime until you’re eighteen, Harley. And I want you to take Xavier’s advanced mutant ethics class before then if you really want to try for villainy.”
Chapter 87

Chapter Summary

Breaking and entering, not the best way to get to know your local superteam.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Beth_Mac, oiseaudemort, geeky_monkey, Tsita, willowfire, Joey99, SionnachOiche3, Quadrad, Maharet, Selene_Aduial, Shadows_of_Shemai, and hhhellcat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Family Movie Night was, generally speaking, sacred among the Avenger’s family. There was no rule mandating attendance, and usually at least one person would excuse themselves to take watch anyway, but those who had decided to attend obeyed certain unspoken laws without fail. One, Pajamas were not optional, and anyone who left real shoes on their feet was the designated pizza fetcher. Two, cell phones and personal electronics were forbidden, any sign of them would get them confiscated and the offender looked at with Steve’s Face of Doom. And three, there was No Superhero Work Allowed, especially if non-Avenger family was in attendance.

Which is why the Family Movie Night scheduled for Bucky’s birthday and the Xavier spring break getting interrupted by Jarvis for superhero shenanigans bit against Darcy’s sense of rightness.

“What did Pym do?” she asked, aware she was growling, but unable to stop. Jarvis played security footage of a break in at the upstate training facility that they’d just gotten cleaned up from the Guardian’s visit.

“He appears to have recruited a thief,” Jarvis said curtly.

“Who’s nearest?” she asked.

“Airman Wilson is in the facility now, practicing for his pilot’s licence renewal. He has expressed a preference for backup before engaging. Aside from that, the Tower is nearest, hence this conversation.” The AI sounded as put out as she felt that an emergency would dare violate the tradition of Movie Night.

“Tell Sam I’ll be there in a jif,” Darcy sighed. She’d chosen tonight to leave her converse on, so she was the one who could get out fastest. She kissed Zoe and Harley on their heads, Steve and Bucky on the lips, and ruffled Natasha’s hair. “You guys keep watching, I’ll get this sorted out.”

As Darcy drove the car up the drive to the facility, she tried to remember exactly what all Pym had stored in Howard’s old warehouse before it had been remodeled. She had kept everything, in the safe in the third sub-basement, but she didn’t know what all was even still useful. If any of it even was useful. Hank had a nasty habit of getting ideas that never came to fruition, but claiming he was really close, honest. It was annoying, and limited his ability to function in the field, although he’d
earned several honors as an agent. Janet had always kept him in line, according to Peggy. Darcy hadn’t met her, she’d died on a mission before HERO was founded.

“So, what have we got?” she asked Sam, standing outside the building.

“An ant problem,” Sam said, and shivered. “Jarvis sealed the building once I got outside, so he’s in there still, it’s a hermetic seal. Problem is, so is the EXO and Redwing. And all our training gear. If he knows he’s been trapped, then he could be arming up as we speak.”

“He does not,” Jarvis said dryly into Darcy’s earbud. Sam wasn’t wearing his, but he was also in flannel sleep pants and a shirt that was way too tight. Suspiciously so.

“Jarvis, what was Sam doing before he sounded the alarm?” Darcy asked. Sam looked at her with shock. “If he was training for his licence test, he should have been in his gear, and we’d be prepared.”

“I am not at liberty to say,” Jarvis informed her. Darcy squinted at the shirt and a lightbulb went off.

“You were banging Assistant Director Hill,” she accused.

“This isn’t our problem right now!” Sam yelped.

“We’re facing an unknown threat, I’d like backup if we’ve got it,” Darcy told him. “Maria is good in a fight. So where is she?”

“Driving to the ER,” Sam grumbled. “She got bit in our exit and is apparently allergic to fire ants. She used an Epi-Pen, but that requires follow up care.”

“That’s fair,” Darcy sighed. She pulled out the back-up goggles she’d grabbed on her way out, the ones Tony had built to give Jarvis a platform for a HUD outside of the armor. “Well, let’s get this show on the road. Strap up, flyboy.”

Sam took them, and the two of them breached the door, following Jarvis’ silent cues about the path to take to the intruder. They cornered him outside the vault. Jarvis enlarged the image so they could watch as the tiny figure froze.

“It’s okay, I don’t think they can see me,” said a tinny voice in Darcy’s ear. Jarvis flashed an alert they their com signals were overlapping on her goggles. She looked at Sam and he nodded.

“Oh, we can see you, man,” he informed their guest. The tinny voice gave a resigned sigh, and they were suddenly face to face with a man in a red suit.

“Hi! I’m Scott.”

“Did he just say Hi, I’m Scott?” asked a different tinny voice, a woman.

“Man, what are you doing here?” Sam asked.

“First of all, I wanna say, big fan.”

“Appreciate it,” Sam conceded. “Now who the hell are you?”

“I’m Ant-Man,” he said and Darcy slapped a palm to her face and groaned.

“Why did Tony leave us that legacy? Why? Literally any other form of introduction is better than that.” She sighed, for what felt like the millionth time that night, and stepped up to the guy. “Look,
Scott, can I call you Scott?"

“Yeah,” he beamed at her.

“Scott, I want to personally apologize for Hank Pym and his bullshit. You’ve somehow been caught up in a grudge match between Hank and our security guy, which is ridiculous and should never have happened. What can I do to make this right, so you don’t feel the need to join the insanity?”

“You need to get that signal decoy,” Hank said. She’d finally placed the voice, even through the overlapped signal’s distortion. Darcy held up a finger and leaned in close, ignoring Scott’s blush.

“Hank, you’re an asshole and if you weren’t rude to Jarvis this wouldn’t be happening. Let Scott make his own choices and shut up before I sic Theta on you.” She leaned back and smiled. “So, Scott, what do you say?”

“Look, I’ll be honest,” he said, pulling his helmet off to scratch at his chestnut hair. “I agreed to pull a heist from PymTech because I can’t get a job with my criminal record. But when I was learning to use the suit, I dunno… I felt special. For the first time in a long time. Like I could make a difference. I’m not sure you could talk me out of it, even if you offered me a better job.”

“Well, that sucks,” Darcy sighed. “Okay, what’s the job?”

Steve liked Scott. He was funny and lighthearted in the face of an incredibly tragic past. He seemed to genuinely care about people, even his criminal past was entirely motivated by justice.

He was also, unfortunately, a fan.

“Ohmigod, I’m touching freedom,” Scott whispered as Steve put a hand on his shoulder to reach past him for a whiteboard marker. Steve rolled his eyes.

“Breathe, Lang, you’re gonna pass out,” Bucky sassed as Steve sketched an action plan.

“Easy for you to say, you’ve been friends since he was the same weight as my seven year old daughter,” Scott sassed back.

“If she’s not underweight, I’ve probably known him since before that,” Bucky commented drily. “But it’s not the size that matters. It’s the stubborn punk. You watch anybody get their face paved by guys three times their size often enough, you stop feeling impressed.”

“Can we maybe not discuss this now,” Steve begged, aware and unrepentant of the whine in his tone. “I need a few more people to make this work, and I’m really sure we can’t use any of our normal options.”

“Why?” Bucky asked.

“Because what we need to do is seriously illegal, and also Tony and Pepper are in India for her sister’s wedding.”

“What do you need?” Scott asked, and Steve looked at him. He probably knew people, and Darcy’s warnings from earlier that year came back to Steve in a sudden rush. It would be better to let locals handle local problems, and give them enough support to make it successful, without throwing major players in places that could grab attention.
“A quality hacker, a driver with low risk aversion, and someone who can do undercover. Also, a second person who could use a shrinking suit would be nice.”

“I can hack it,” offered Harley. Steve shot him a look.

“You are supposed to be in bed, young man.”

“I’m a teenager, Dad, bedtimes are for little kids.”

“Bedtimes are for growing kids, and you gained an inch in the last month,” Steve pointed out. “Besides, no robberies until you’re eighteen.”

“Technically if we do this right, it’s not robbery,” Scott said, “robbery implies violence, this would be a burglary with a side of theft.”

“Stop helping my kid’s arguments,” Steve groaned. “No crime until you’re eighteen, Harley. And I want you to take Xavier’s advanced mutant ethics class before then if you really want to try for villainy.”

Harley made an exaggerated groan of exasperation with all adult-kind, and headed back towards his room.

“You seem pretty relaxed about maybe raising a supervillain, there,” Scott commented, for once not seeming nervous or eager.

“I’m as sure as I can be the worst he’ll be is a vigilante, and in this family, we can’t really throw stones over that,” Steve explained. “Also, we’ve figured out if we give either of our kids enough trust and the expectation of thinking through their plans, they feel they owe us in good behavior. It’s not an ideal mindset, but their doctors say they’ve stopped acting like good behavior earns basic survival, so at least they’re getting better. If either of them really rebels, it might be a good thing.”

Scott shuffled like he wanted to say something, but instead he looked at Steve’s gameplan. “I think I can get you the people you need. I’m going to need to use your phone.”

Hope van Dyne had had a very trying week so far. Hell, it’d been a trying month, what with her father’s crazy schemes and juggling Darren Cross’s lunatic ego. She really didn’t need two brunettes and a blonde showing up at her Dad’s place during a planning session while their wunderkind thief was AWOL on the other side of the country.

“Hi, I’m Cathi and we’re here for your home-to-spa appointment,” sparkled one of the girls, a faint accent tingeing her voice as she gestured to the pink van behind her.

“I didn’t make an appointment,” Hope began when the blonde rolled her eyes.

“You were cut from the roster for just this reason, Katushka,” she sighed. “We’re here in lieu of the Lieu. Come with us, this place is not safe.”

“And you were cut for that,,” the other brunette commented drily. She stuck a hand out. “Maya Hansen, pleased to meet you. Darcy sent us to get you and Hank moved into the secondary HQ. These are my sisters, Catherine and Nika. If you’ll just excuse me, Mama gave me the crowbar for getting Pym’s underwear out from his wedgie.”

With that horrible image, she pushed past Hope and went looking for Hank. The blonde looked
sympathetically at Hope and shrugged. “Mama doesn’t trust me with the blackmail, I work for mob.”

Hope decided then and there not to worry about it. The human hurricane named Darcy Lewis had apparently decided to bless them with her help, and statistically speaking, that meant they were going to win. The van took her to a nice hotel a few blocks from PymTech, where Scott and his friends were busy freaking out. Hope ignored them in favor of the twenty-something sitting cross-legged on the bed, earbuds in as she typed.

“Darcy, what’s going on?”

“Scott filled us in after the B and E, and if your dad hadn’t pissed off Jarvis, we’d have come a lot sooner for this. Or you could have called through the Network. That’s why we have it.”

Hope shifted uncomfortably. She hated how Darcy could simultaneously look like someone’s kid sister who shouldn’t be trusted to house sit, and also make her feel like a kid in the principal’s office. “We can handle it. The Yellowjacket Project isn’t exactly a world-ender. It’s not ideal, but it’s fine.”

Darcy looked unimpressed. “I’ve been reviewing the recordings of your dad’s calls to us. It’s more than that.”

“Dad… may not have wanted Stark to know about it. I told him we had to at least try to tell you.”

“And then let the emotionally constipated, communication stunted man handle it without oversight?”

Hope sighed. She wasn’t getting out of this conversation without doing the responsible thing. “How many fruit baskets do I owe your guy?”

“He enjoys classical music, digitize some of your mom’s vinyl collection and email it over and he’ll probably forgive you.” Darcy popped her shoulders and Hope shuddered. She was about to ask more about the poor security guy who’d been traumatized by her father’s none too gentle manner when the man himself walked in, wheeling a large case.

“Dad, what’s that?”

“Birthday present.”

“My birthday isn’t for months.”

“It’s a belated gift,” Hank sighed. “From your mother.”

He unlatched the trunk and opened it, internal lights flickering on as he did, illuminating a suit. A suit designed for a woman.

Hope breathed in slowly as she cautiously stroked the layed material. She smiled and looked at the crew around her. Darcy, as always, looked like some hipster coffee shop spawned a human avatar. Scott was poorly hiding his excitement in an attempt to look cool for his friends. Said friends were practically vibrating in place over the hotel suite. Her father was holding himself stiffly between three women who, Hope now realized, were trained in the same school for killers that had been supplying the world’s best assassins and spies for seventy years. And Hope was touching the suit designed and worn by her mother. The superhero.

“It’s about damn time,” she said slowly. “So what’s the plan?”

Chapter End Notes
Translations:
EXO and Redwing: Sam's flightpack and robot assistant, respectively.
Epi-Pen: epinephrine injector used to counteract allergens.
HUD: heads-up display
Theta: the Theta squad of S H I E L D, highly capable and chaotic ex-gymnasts.
wunderkind: wonder child or prodigy.
B and E: breaking and entering, sneaking into private property.

Notes:
Sam's shirt is too tight because it's not his shirt, it's Maria Hill's. They accidentally swapped while getting dressed quickly due to ants.

Tony's introduction as a superhero ("I am Iron Man") has the kind of social impact that means it got turned into a bit of a meme surrounding superheroes. In this 'verse, Christian Bale's Batman was directly riffing on Tony with "I'm Batman". Darcy considers it needlessly dramatic and kinda lame.

Harley and Zoe are both survivors of childhood neglect and incidental abuse. As such, actual rebellion would be a sign they feel safe pushing boundaries. But they're also just good kids, worthy of trust.

The girls are Catherine/Katushka (a hacker and odd-job girl in HERO), Nika (sub-boss of the Las Vegas Bratva), and Maya (mad scientist), all of whom are former Red Room girls, Darcy's daughters.

The Network is HERO's set up of emails, dead-drops, and information smugglers that can carry messages secretly between undercover agents. Hope was, for all intents, undercover at PymTech and thus could have used it to call for help. However, her strained relationship with her Dad tends to erase her good sense in fits of temper.

The Yellowjacket is indeed a serious threat, but as of this point, it's not in full production and if worst comes to worst Hope knows she can commit career suicide by destroying the critical data on it. It can be handled alone, but only at great cost. Basically, she got Jan's self sacrifice streak.

Fruit baskets are the traditionally agreed apology gift within HERO for reasons poorly remembered. (It dates to the Howlies and Dugan bribing forgiveness from Peggy with fresh fruit.) Hope's not asking for an actual number of baskets, just an estimate of how large her show of contriteness should be. Darcy offers a good fix without revealing Jarvis' AI nature.

In this 'Verse Hope found out about Janet Van Dyne and her death in action a LOT earlier, thanks to HERO. So she doesn't need the Wasp suit explained, just given to her.

Teaser:
“Paxton?” Scott asked, turning to face them. “What the hell are you doing here?”
“SAME TO YOU LANG,” Jim shouted, and fired his taser before thinking.
“You know,” The Lieu said from beside him, “I’ve had that same instinct before. I ended up adopting both of them. Something to think about.”
Chapter 88

Chapter Summary

Heists and flirting and family shenanigans, all just another day in the life of Ant Ma.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To oiseaudemort, Snowecat, Beth_Mac, quadrad, SionnachOiiche3, willowfire, Joey99, Shadows_of_Shemai, and Tsita.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Somewhere, in another life, Luis was probably terrified out of his mind and hiding it under whistles and jokes. In that life, he was probably repeating a prayer to San Dimas under his breath as he knocked out a guard with only his inexpert prison brawl skills. That Luis was, most likely, totally f*cked, the Luis lucky enough to live in this world thought with a grateful nod to his undercover partner, a smoking hot Russian girl who’d been shuffled from hacking beside Kurt to helping Luis after the two computer whizzes nearly came to blows.

“So is your sister going to be okay in the van?” he asked, looking for a topic on conversation.

“Maya will survive. She likes computers, but not enough to care what that philistine does to a keyboard.” Catherine shrugged, an elegant gesture in her grey uniform, a custom-fitted and genuine PymTech article, stolen and tailored days in advance of the launch. Luis himself was in engineer yellow, the toolbox in his hand finishing off Catherine’s explanation of supervising maintenance.

“Kurt’s not a bad man,” Luis started, but Catherine stopped him as they stepped into the room buzzing with electrical signals. Her eyes were clearly only for the tech.

“Webworm, how’s it look in there?” asked their commandant, Darcy Lewis, aka The Lieutenant, aka most badass person Luis had ever met. He repressed the desire to thank her again for coming to help his buddy Scott. Scott was a good man, but also an idiot who was gonna get dead one day if good people didn’t look out for him.

“Cluttered,” Catherine answered, guiding Luis to a panel that he popped open for her. “I need two minutes, thirty seconds to get you a proper uplink.”

“For someone who insists on Devorak, that’s pretty slow,” Kurt snarked, his voice bitter. Luis rolled his eyes.

“Cut it out, guys, we’re in this together,” he chided as he moved to reduce water main pressure the next room over.

“One minute, forty five seconds,” Catherine said, typing furiously. He was wiping his hands as he came in when she shifted her voice. “After this do you want to go get breakfast with me?”

Luis looked at her. She was still typing, but she’d clearly just asked an incongruous question. “Me?”

“Yes. I know a very good diner. Their waffles are fantastic.” She looked at him. “Unless you don’t like waffles.”

“Who doesn’t like waffles?” Luis asked.

“Good,” Catherine declared, snapping the keyboard back into place. “We’re done here,” she said to the open channel. Then her face shifted and she was speaking to him alone. “I’ll pick you up at six. Bring quarters, there’s a jukebox.”

She turned and walked away, and Luis thought briefly of that other Luis, the one who had to do this, and several other jobs tonight, because he was operating alone, with a handful of broken thieves he collected because his life didn’t have enough family in it.

Poor bastard didn’t know what he was missing.

“We have a problem,” Dave reported. “That’s a Crown Vic.”

“How much of a problem is that?” Kurt asked him. Nika rolled her eyes.

“The Crown Victoria is the favorite car of undercover police in this country,” she explained. Two men hopped out and headed towards Pym. Nika sighed. “I’ll stop them. You two stay on plan.”

She jogged across the open space as Pym was trying to explain the seriousness of his need to go inside. “Hello, I am Avtoritet of Russian Mafia in Las Vegas,” she told the burlier man, tapping his shoulder to get his focus. “I would like to turn myself in.”

The officers turned to look at her like she was crazy, and Pym slipped away into the security lines.

“And why would you do that?”

“Need to unburden myself of sin,” she explained, her grin widening and her accent thicker than it ever had been, even when she’d only lived in Russia. She loved this gambit. “Recently joined very nice group, Jehovah Witness. Maybe I tell you about good news at station, da?”

The white officer blanched an appealing shade usually found on corpses, and his black partner laughed. “You’re still coming to the station. My cousins are Witness, I’m not fooled by that.”

“Well fuck,” Nika sighed, and stuck her hands out. “If my call is to Vegas PD can I get an inter-office discount?”

Scott zipped down the line and into the containment chamber with the Yellowjacket suit. He was careful to mind the edges of the tube, for all the team had turned off the laser grid, they hadn’t been able to tell if there were any nasty surprises on the surface.

“Hank, I’m in,” he reported, reaching out to touch the gleaming yellow suit. As soon as he did, it yanked downward and he heard a strangely booming laugh. Small size warped how things sounded, but this was also a part of the chamber’s shape.

“Hey little guy,” Cross said, tapping the glass. Scott spared a moment to feel pity for every fish that
Scott released the line and dropped to the floor. There had to be a way out of here. His thoughts were paused though, as he heard his own name. Cross was facing away from him, but the crazy bastard was facing Hank, and Hank had a comm in. There were also, creepily enough, visual aids in the form of his mug shot… and pictures of Maggie’s house and Cassie. The monologue went from creepy to enraging pretty quickly from there.

“Don’t do it,” Hank said, and Scott paused. “If you sell to these men, you’ll unleash chaos.”

“I already have,” Cross said, “and for twice the price thanks to you. It’s not easy to infiltrate an Avengers Facility. Thankfully word travels fast.”

“I know some people who will want to know how that word traveled,” Hank remarked, and a line of static cut the comms as a new voice broke in.

“Ant-Man, let’s cut this short,” Darcy Lewis said in a clipped order. “Wasp, I want him given cover. Webworm, pull alarms and begin the evacuation. Lynx, get your ass back here, but feel free to bring your new friends.”

Somehow, the soothing patter of orders calmed Scott’s mind, and he realized what he needed to do. He flicked out the disks, one red, one blue, and the two sides of the bubble warped in opposite directions, exploding as he grew to full size and punched Darren Cross in the jaw.

Jim Paxton had been having a bad day. Jim Paxton, if he was being honest with himself, had not been having a good time ever since his fiance’s ex had gotten out early on good behavior. In fact, his life had gotten significantly more difficult at random and unpleasant times.

Case in point, being choked out by a woman’s thighs while she steered his car with her feet. Gale had gotten hit in the head as she spun herself in the back to kick down the divider between front and back, and all Jim could think was she couldn’t possibly be a normal human to have done that.

That, and that if Maggie found out, he was going to be buying all the chocolates.

The humiliating display ended, though, as they crashed into a tree outside PymTech. His handcuffs were dropped in his lap as the airbag deflated, and the woman patted his cheek.

“You’re not bad, Paxton. Get that stick from your rear and you might even be fun. But not yet, you need to call headquarters.”

“What? Why?”

A tank erupted from the side of the building.

“That’s why. I have to go help evacuate people, the server farm is rigged to explode. Bozhe Moy, I hate working with superheroes.”

“Super heroes?” Too late, she was gone, into the mess of dust and screaming. Jim sighed and turned on his radio as he got out of the car and flagged a medic over to Gale. “We’re going to need backup. All the backup, there’s a 10-33 and also a tank.”

“A tank?” Dispatch asked.
“We need to get a ten-code for superheroes,” Jim said with resignation. “I need help evacuating the area, there’s some sort of super fight, just get me backup!”

He was waving people to various places, trying to keep a lid on things, when the helicopter lifted off and that stupid van played its stupid horn right behind him.

“Get in loser, we’re going Avenging,” called a young woman in a blue jumpsuit. A familiar blue jumpsuit. A jumpsuit Cassie had wanted a copy of for Halloween.

“Fuck my life,” Jim Paxton sighed as he climbed into a dubious van beside The Lieu.

“I got him,” reported the driver, a black man Jim was pretty sure he’d seen before. “What in the… are those LASERS?”

“They’re falling,” Jim pointed out. “Or coming from inside something falling. And that chopper isn’t going to land pretty.”

“Maya, tell me you have something for that,” The Lieu asked a brunette. The woman grimaced, nodded, and opened her side of the van to tuck and roll onto the street with a golf bag that Jim suspected did not contain drivers. The Lieu smiled grimly and touched her earpiece. “Scott, I need intel, what’s happening up there?”

“Well for one,” came the voice of his fiance’s ex through a speaker shaped like a cartoon spider, “Cross is a lunatic in an unshielded suit, firing lasers at me.”

“I’m gonna disintegrate you!” screamed someone on the other side of the connection.

“Playing Disintegration, by The Cure,” announced a deep and warped version of a google assistant. The Lieu slapped a button and the van sped up.

Minutes later, they reached a backyard that had been utterly destroyed by some kind of insanity.

“Paxton?” Scott asked, turning to face them. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“SAME TO YOU LANG,” Jim shouted, and fired his taser before thinking.

“You know,” The Lieu said from beside him, “I’ve had that same instinct before. I ended up adopting both of them. Something to think about.” She patted his shoulder and spat out some rapid words in a language he didn’t understand. The other man in the back of the van came and helped her pick Scott up, and put him in the back.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
San Dimas: Saint of ethical criminals, the "good thief" who was crucified beside Christ.
Webworm: Catherine/Katenka’s codename, after the webworm moth.
Devorak: a keyboard layout prefered by some speed-typers over the standard qwerty (top line of keys gives the names.)
Avtoritet: the subcommander of a gang in the Bratva (Russian Mob).
Jehovah's Witness: a religious sect that uses aggressive door-to-door evangelism to recruit members. They’re commonly considered annoying for their persistence, and non-Witness people tend to avoid them, but they're not bad people.
Lynx: Nika's codename, not actually referencing the wild cat, but rather the green lynx spider.
Bozhe Moy: My God (Russian)

Notes:
Nika knows cops, some of her best friends are cops, since she runs her mafia as an alternative justice crew and sometimes there's overlap in goals. So she knows what happens when someone walks up and announces they're in a criminal organization, and what happens when that person looks patently insane after (they get full attention, then dismissed) and she's using that to give Hank a window for escape.

In this version of events, Hope Van Dyne is wearing the Wasp suit under her pantsuit and can immediately render super-powered aid to Scott.

The currently existent police system in San Francisco is woefully inadequate for superhero shenanigans. Compare to New York, where they not only have a ten-code for superpowered fight (10-616) but weekend training sessions alongside at least two Avengers and some SHIELD agents in how to provide proper back-up. Now that there's a West Coast superhero duo based there, I imagine San Francisco will catch up to New York pretty quickly.

The Google assistant voice is deep and warped because Jarvis is helping modulate out Scott and Darren's teeny tiny voices and the contrast makes the phone sound deeper.

Teaser:

“Paxton,” Scott said urgently as they rounded onto Winter Street, “I’m trusting you with Cassie’s life. You take our daughter and you fucking book it.”
Chapter 89

Chapter Summary

The battle isn't yet won, but it will be.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Tsita, willowfire, quadrad, Joey99, Snowecat, Beth_Mac, SionnachOiche3, Shadows_of_Shemai, Readertee, hhhellcat, and MzSarahGrace.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Scott woke to a splitting headache and a vague understanding that Paxton, Maggie’s dick of a fiance, was somehow responsible. He shrugged his shoulders and opened his eyes, looking at Paxton at Kurt facing off while Darcy buried giggles in her fist while scrolling her phone.

“Uh, guys?”

“Oh, hey Scott,” Dave called from the front. “Just in time. You want pizza to celebrate, or something healthier?”

“Cross was still in the bug zapper but I’m pretty sure not down for the count,” Scott said instead of answering.

“Your delusions are getting a little out of hand,” Paxton griped. He was clearly going to say more when Darcy broke out swearing, starting in English and transitioning into Russian. Kurt looked appalled, so apparently it was bad.

“Dave, get us to 840 Winter Street,” she snapped.

“What!?!?” Paxton and Scott gasped at the same time.

“We celebrated too soon. Again. That’s a bad habit, and I need to break it,” Darcy muttered.

“That’s where Maggie lives!” Paxton yelled.

“More to the point, it’s where Cassie lives, and Cross is a big creepy stalker who had pictures of me with her,” Scott said. Paxton went pale and his lips thinned into a tense line. He pushed the panic down and cleared his mind. It was like getting the ants to obey him. Clarity and focus, one goal that took his whole mind.

Save Cassie.

“Paxton, I know you don’t like me,” Scott began, and the man in question snorted. Kurt accidentally-on-purpose shifted and dug the corner of his computer into the detective’s gut. Scott tried to refocus them. “I get it. We’re very different people, and you see me as a threat to the people you love because you had to pick up the pieces when I had my moment of terminal stupidity. I get it,
Paxton. You don’t like me because you love them. I love them too. So we’re going to work together to save them, because if you don’t and he hurts one hair on Cassie’s head, you’re going to kick your own ass black and blue, no help needed from me. You know that, I know that, it’s just a given for parents. Cross, however, is a sick bastard with a seriously messed up father-figure relationship and I’m willing to bet he doesn’t have a clue what a dad will do to save a daughter.”

Paxton nodded, almost reluctantly, but agreeing nonetheless. Scott continued, plan unfolding in his head. One goal, one need, one way to get it.

“I can fight Cross on his level, the suits work similarly, and I trained to fight while shrinking and growing. You’ll be unexpected, so when I distract him, you grab Cassie and Maggie and you run like you’ve never run before, got it?”

“I’m supposed to run away?” The detective snorted. “What do you think I am, Scott? I’m SFPD, we don’t run from danger.”

“You’re not running,” Darcy said quietly. “You’re evacuating civilians from an active superhero fight. I was on the ground at the Battle of New York. Getting civilians to leave while their world is laser-blasted into constituent atoms is a hard job. It’s also the one that saves their lives.”

“Paxton,” Scott said urgently as they rounded onto Winter Street, “I’m trusting you with Cassie’s life. You take our daughter and you fucking book it.”

“Our daughter?” Paxton asked, voice cracking.

“You put in the work while I was doing time, she’s as much yours as mine,” Scott admitted. “I only ever wanted a chance to put in that work, but the world doesn’t forgive as easily as a seven year old. Ex-cons don’t hold down jobs long in this city. No job, no child support payments. No child support payments, no chance to provide emotional support. Just no chance. But you’re a good dad. So you save your kid, and I’ll do the one job that can’t fire me for having a record, since my audition was a heist.”

“Scott…”

Scott turned away and opened the side door as they rolled up to the house. He couldn’t face that look of pity right now. He had a goal.

Save Cassie.

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Jim was already heading out of the door of the van when The Lieu stopped him and handed him what looked like an especially nice bluetooth headset melded with something off the bridge of the Enterprise.

“The J-comm will let you hear and understand what Scott and Darren are saying, which should give you an advantage in gauging when to act. Otherwise, their voices would be way too high pitched and quiet to make out. While you’re listening, pay attention to Cross’ villainous monologues. I caught his show earlier and… it may inform how you treat Scott going forward. Remember, if you find yourself paraphrasing villains, you’re probably doing something wrong.”

Jim shook his head and slipped the device over his ear. He didn’t want any part of that two bit, low life, good for nothing thief in the future, and he especially didn’t like the implication he’d been in the wrong for enforcing the law. But a tactical advantage was a tactical advantage, and he’d be a fool to pass up Avenger-grade technology.
He ran past the gathered officers and past Maggie as the rest of the Lieu’s people swarmed out to push people back. If the destruction of PymTech were an indicator, a safe distance was further away than usual home invasions. Upstairs, he was treated to a giant ant the size of a golden retriever scuttling past him, and flashes of destructive light peppering his daughter’s room. Like Tinkerbell but evil.

“You insult me Scott,” he heard, and jumped before recalling the earpiece. “Everything about you insults me. You’re just so small, so petty. It’d be a lot easier to kill you if you were bigger.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Scott yelled, and a flash turned Cassie’s Thomas the Tank Engine into a life-size replica with a speed that cracked the open window and tore through the house to the yard. Jim darted around the cover provided by Thomas to pull Cassie up into his arms.

“I’m going to show you just how insignificant you are,” Cross growled, suddenly appearing as he grew from flying insect to full-grown man. “You two bit hack! You arrogant petty thief! I’m going to destroy everything you love.”

Scott appeared as well, decking the scientist and shooting Jim a look that could cut glass, even though the ridiculous helmet. Jim ducked one of the pointed pincer-arms sprouting from Cross’s suit and rolled across the floor, protecting Cassie’s head with his hand. Then, Cross shot a laser at the door frame and Jim realized he was trapped. He looked around and didn’t see Scott.

“I can’t get through!” he heard Scott yell.

“It’s titanium, you idiot,” Cross sneered, reaching back and grabbing Scott in his fists.

“DADDY!” Cassie screamed, agonized and wailing.

“Get her out of here!” Scott ordered, growing to human size.

“I can’t really, there’s no doorway,” Jim shouted. Scott grabbed at Cross and threw him bodily at the wall of debris where the door had been. The super-villain shrank as he flew backward, sinking invisibly into the pile of crushed plaster and wood.

“I’m going to do something really dumb now,” Scott announced calmly. He looked at Cassie, still crying on Jim’s hip. “Love you, Peanut.”

“Daddy…”

“Do what Detective Paxton says, he’ll keep you safe,” Scott told her, with a meaningful look at Jim. “I gotta shrink between the molecules.”

“Scott don’t you fucking dare,” commanded a new voice, a woman. Hope Van Dyne, the one who’d turned him in, Jim realized. “I’m five minutes out, hold on for five minutes, we’ll find another way.”

Cross was standing out of the rubble, lasers glowing.

“Go,” Jim said, nodding at Scott.

Scott vanished.

“Sorry sweetheart,” Cross said to Cassie as he blocked their exit. “You have to help Daddy pay for his mistakes.”
“Get away from us!” Cassie shouted. She squirmed from his arms and ran to kick Cross in the shin. Cross laughed, then spasmed. His suit sparked and Jim grabbed Cassie and prepared to roll them under her bed, a poor shield, but one that might work. Cross let out a pitiful squeak as his body folded into itself and vanished into a single point of light.

“Daddy?” Cassie asked. “Daddy where are you?”

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There were things in this new world. Things that couldn’t be explained. Mysteries and powers and ways physics had of selectively ignoring the objective truth in favor of subjective expectation. Miracles.

Some were more aware of those miracles than others, and the girl in the cage was one such person. Her mind had been stretched, torn open and patched together with old angers and fears, sewn up with the sinew of loss and bandaged in hate. Her other half, the pale, fast shadow beside her soul, he too had been cut and stitched and expanded, but he dealt with it much better than she had. Or perhaps much worse. She mused the possible relative positions of their coping as she floated a plain pine block at the instruction of the doctors. She recalled something behind the hate, a remnant gratitude she hid and nurtured like a weed in the cracked street of her mind. She’d been promised… something. People to come and free her, to free her brother. Her cage was abandoned, the doctors gone in between one musing and the next. Her brother had fallen unconscious again after his tests, running himself into the ground, like always.

She reached out her power, twisting scarves of luck and possibility, trying to find the promise again.

Instead, she felt a desperate need, a single-minded goal, an order unto the secret heart of someone who was both here and not anywhere, impossibly small and unfathomably large. A quantum distress call echoed through all of time and space.

The girl in the cage smiled, a benevolent power, an ancient goddess or fabled sorceress, seeking to grant blessings on the one who petitioned the universe itself for aid. She flicked the gem of power back to his hand and sighed as the possibilities became probabilities, as probability solidified into certainty.

“Pietro?”

“Wanda?” he croaked. His voice came harsh and quiet now, the soft cooing she remembered, or maybe her mother remembered, gone in agonized screams long past. Or yet to come. Time was a fiction they politely agreed to live by.

“Be prepared to run. Our freedom will come.”

“You know me sister,” he said, sibilant and sly. “I’m always ready to run.”

Chapter End Notes

No translations this time.

Notes:
Scott's plan is pretty solid, tactically speaking. He's been working with ants for the past
few weeks in intense training, and if there's one thing ants do better than about anything else, it's teamwork. Although in the movie this is shown as mostly a hive-mind situation with Scott or Hank giving orders to the ants, I believe Scott actually picked up some solid grounding in teamwork from his insect partners. He's certainly shown using individual skillsets effectively in the heist scene, and that sort of leadership translates into good tactics in this sort of situation.

Jim is thrown by Scott calling Cassie "our daughter" because he'd previously only seen Scott as a direct rival for a limited resource (Cassie's time and affection) and being acknowledged as a parent to her skews out his worldview. In actuality, Cassie's love is an unlimited and renewable resource, once her parents stop fighting over it forcing her to take sides. Side-taking is destructive to interpersonal relationships, but working together tends to solve that sort of problem.

Technically, being a former convict shouldn't prevent someone from finding legal work. Reentry into society is held as a goal for incarceration, but in all reality it's actually very difficult to get legal employment once you've been released from jail. Studies have been done showing the difficulties and the risks for ex-cons who want to find legal work, and Scott's story is all too common. Jim, though, is a member of law enforcement and not used to being forced to see where his calling has failed people, especially innocent people or people like Scott, who have paid their debts to society and are still being hurt. It's not actually pity he feels, it's guilt, but neither he nor Scott are ready to understand that fact.

J-comms are the Jarvis-run communication devices used by the Avengers in the field. Jarvis doesn't talk through them unless necessary or mutually desired (he and Tony chat, but he won't talk to Jim) because it's distracting to everyone, but he will help filter and process anything that would fall outside human ability, such as the high-pitch low volume speaking of an ant-sized person.

The Thomas the Tank Engine breaking the wall and crushing the car makes no sense with the in-universe explanation of Pym particles, for that matter neither does the tank at PymTech. For this particular case, I'm sticking with the canon actions and we'll assume Pym doesn't actually understand how his own invention works so he smoke-screens with excessively complex technobabble.

Hope here knows and understands the risk Scott's taking, which, thanks to Jarvis' intervention via J-comm, Jim gets to sort of understand. He knows it's dangerous, anyways. For those who have not seen the movie, shrinking beyond molecular size puts the shrinker into a sort of quantum free-fall, shrinking forever into the Quantum Realm where things like size, time, and space have very little objective meaning. Janet Van Dyne was lost on a mission where she shrank between molecules to stop an intercontinental missile that would have made the Cold War a hot one. Scott is the first person to return from that, so he and Hope have every reason to think shrinking like that to stop Cross was a suicide attack.

The PoV in the last section is Wanda, and as such is a little detached from reality. Basically, she has access to quantum power in the form of her luck manipulation and when she used it to try to firm up the chance of rescue, she found Scott and pushed the disk he used to power his regulator back into his hand, saving him. This insured a sequence of events which will result in her and Pietro being rescued.
Teaser:

“May I remind you, I had to recruit several superpowered individuals just to make you safe to be around yourself. Doing the same for 7.442 billion people sounds exhausting.”
Chapter 90

Chapter Summary

Flights and fights and a battle in Sokovia is about to begin.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Tsita, SionnachOiche3, Shadows_of_Shemai, Beth_Mac, Joey99, Dragon Moon, willowfire, terrence_rogue, hhhellcat, Banmosi, and SnowDove30.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“It’s not a choice,” Darcy said firmly. Hank scowled, but he didn’t fight her further. “Good. Glad we handled that. You’ll like the Tower, our facilities are some of the best and if I say so myself, our intern staff is top of the business of lab assistance.”

“I’m not a child, you don’t need to babysit me,” he grumbled and shifted in the insanely luxe seat of the Stark Industries jet Tony sent to collect her and the cranky rogue scientist.

“You’re a scientist,” Darcy pointed out dryly. “In my experience that means I do indeed need to keep you under supervision. Besides, this whole mess got so far out of hand because you didn’t want to play nice with Tony because Howard had some friends with a nasty case of sticky-fingers. You need to spend some time with Tony so you know he’s not his father. They’re actually almost nothing alike, and everyone’s life will be easier if you two could be friends.”

Hank just sat there, silent and clearly unhappy. Well, her job was to prevent him ending the world, not to keep him happy. Which was a good thing, as she wasn’t sure anyone currently on this plane of existence could do that. If he wanted to sulk, though, that was his choice. She would enjoy the rest of her flight listening to the Fun Home cast recording, and the two hours of peace were a blessed rarity.

Unpacking him at the Tower was significantly less peaceful, especially settling him into the lab space. Betty had done her best to set something up for a quantum physicist, but despite having worked out of his own basement these past decades, Hank picked at every piece of equipment she’d gotten for him. Bruce turned an appalling shade of mint, and Darcy spent the next few hours helping Hulk talk out Bruce’s trauma around father figures in the Asym Gym. There were fingerpaints involved, and Darcy added Brian Banner to her list of people to tase on sight.

Steve gave up trying to make friends with Hank after a day and a half, and the afternoon after that, Bucky pulled their husband out on a motorcycle trip down the coast to avoid the stress buildup they both saw in him. Visiting Sam’s Ma and Laura Barton would do him good, but Darcy still had work to attend to. Work made harder by the sudden civil war taking place in her assistant staff.

“Ian, what am I looking at here?” she asked her former intern as she stared at a transcript from an internal SI chat.
“A minor disagreement over some of Johansen and Riri’s work turned bad,” he said flatly. Ian may have been calm, quiet, and even reserved, but the Brit was pretty clearly furious. Darcy couldn’t blame him. She wasn’t in the habit of censoring her interns and assistants, but some of this….

“Well, we fire anyone who made actual threats, clearly,” she sighed. “And add them to the Avenger’s watch list, disgruntled scientists are always a thing to keep an eye on. I’ll start vetting diversity training retreats, you spread the rumor there’s leadership seminars in the works.”

“I don’t think we should even entertain the idea that any of this deserves rewards,” Ian said slowly. “It may lessen the blow of mandated courtesy lessons, but these… people….”

“Don’t deserve soft blows,” Darcy finished. “I know. But after we get them out to some campground and spend two week beating common sense into them, I want to see who comes home and complains… and who comes home and pretends it was a reward. The first category is teachable, the second should be firmly invited to seek employment somewhere that will tolerate their persistently ignorant behavior. The option has to remain open.”

“Can I at least look up actual leadership seminars?” Ian asked plaintively. “Some of the assistants have been handling this really well, and they should be given the chance to move up.”

“Of course, and it’ll help you if you don’t have to actually lie. We’ll send Betty and Bruce with that team, they’ve been working at developing effective handling tools for Hulk, leadership lessons would help them too, and Hulk is good enough in wilderness environments he can easily be defense.”

“May I recommend Dr. Pym go with the trouble maker group?” Ian asked. Darcy snorted.

“There’s a lesson about foxes and hen houses in that idea.” She shook her head, bouncing the shorter curls she’d gotten for summer. “Ask the Air Force if we can borrow Colonel Rhodes. He’s immune to most forms of bullshit and has the bonus of being close to Tony. Even SI’s littlest shits love Tony and hate to upset him.”

Darcy sighed and closed her eyes for a second as her friend hurried off to do his part of the plan. Her work wasn’t ever boring, but she would chew off her own leg for a month with no crises.

Tony worried his lip as he looked at the readings Jarvis had given him. He was going to have to talk to Hank. As much as he hated the idea of spending that much time with an old friend of his father, he had to admit his limits, and quantum physics was a ball game he barely even knew the rules of, let alone how to play. He called the older man up and showed him what he’d found.

“So, I think what I’m seeing here is a sort of five or six dimensional tunnel effect,” Tony concluded. “Connecting Scott’s exit from our plane in San Francisco, to a random stretch of empty woods in Eastern Europe.”

“Amazing,” Hank said, sounding impressed. “I’ll admit I didn’t think you had it in you to understand this sort of work, Stark. That’s exactly what you’ve found. Someone used a massive amount of quantum energy at the exact same time Scott was absent from our reality. That sort of power is….”

“Making me wish I invested in more absorbent underwear?” Tony finished. “They’re subtle, whoever they are. That amount of energy, if not guided with exceptional precision… I mean, if they hadn’t had the touch of a butterfly, I’d be scraping Darcy and Natasha off the floor for a year.”
“Why Darcy and Natasha?” Hank asked, looking surprised.

“The sourcepoint is in Sokovia,” Tony explained. “At the southern border, just one reasonably large national forest away from Victor’s house. Victor is their friend, and Nat at the least doesn’t have enough of those she can afford to lose one. Darcy would just have her usual survivor guilt, but her daughter being emotionally flatlined would complicate that.”

“Ah.” Hank nodded. “And these readings mean someone very easily could have cratered a few small countries. Are you sure two women should really outweigh that?”

Tony looked at him, trying to find the words. How did you explain the inability to care about faceless millions as much as you cared about family? How did you excuse that failure as a superhero?

“Not just two women. Those two women specifically. The two women who save planets about once a year,” Tony said tightly, knowing he was making excuses. “You want to argue greater good, those two and Pepper are the greatest good anybody in this tower is ever going to find. And Jane, actually. Jane saved the universe once.”

“All due respect to Doctor Foster, but I’m not so sure we should be putting the hope of a planet in the hands of a few empowered individuals.” Hank looked away from him to study the satellite images. “It might just be easier to protect the world by not building such things. The history is… problematic.”

“We can’t really put the genie back in the bottle, Hank.”

“No, we can’t.” He sighed and rubbed his face. “But look at us. You build your suit in the desert, Stane builds Iron Monger. Banner becomes the Hulk, Ross creates Abomination. You build War Machine, Ivan Vanko builds the Whiplash harness. You build the Avengers, not a year later AIM kidnaps the president with human bombs. Steve Rogers comes back from the dead thanks to Erskine’s work, but Zola resurrected Hydra under Howard’s nose. I build the Ant Man suit… and Cross builds Yellowjacket. When we push the boundaries, someone comes along to push back, to make our hard work evil.”

“So what do we do?” Tony asked. “We’re only human, Thor and Loki aside. We’re fallible by definition. I mean, it’s not like I can give the security of the world to Jarvis.”

“Why not?”

“I already said no, Doctor Pym,” Jarvis informed them. “Back during planning for the Expo, when Sir believed he would die.”

“I didn’t want to inherit the family business,” Tony said ruefully. “His exact words were ‘if you try to make me create world peace, I will erase your entire electronic presence until you only exist on the papers of tabloids’ which is pretty much an AI’s version of a death threat. I hadn’t realized until then he’d run projections of how much effort making humans safe for each other to be near would take. Apparently humanity can’t be baby proofed like a house can.”

“Not in a cost effective manner, Sir,” Jarvis said, a slight sigh under his tone. “May I remind you, I had to recruit several superpowered individuals just to make you safe to be around yourself. Doing the same for 7.442 billion people sounds exhausting.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that,” Hank laughed. Tony smiled, maybe Pym wasn’t so bad after all.

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“Thanks for letting us stage out of Latveria, Victor,” Steve said with a warm look. The dictator was currently doing rounds at the Northern Doomstadt Regional Hospital, and Steve had been told to drop by before going to their forward base. “Sokovia is still tetchy about Tony, even if the Prime Minister did say he wanted us taking out the squid presence.”

“Mister Stark is preferable to Nazis,” Victor said calmly, “but that is a particularly low bar, and his weapons were floating about in bad hands near here for far too long.”

“He didn’t know that,” Steve pointed out as Victor used sleight of hand to produce a gem-like chunk of rock candy from the ear of a girl with no hair and the gaunt look of chemotherapy.

“And I believe that,” Victor said, moving on to a boy tying knots with a prosthetic. “Because I’ve met Tony, and he’s a guilt-prone disaster in human skin. But he’s very good at hiding that fact, and it can be hard to reconcile the savvy businessman, the perverted buffoon, the superhero… and a man who didn’t know his weapons were killing our people. Occam’s Razor, in the few cases it is wrong, can be a nearly insurmountable barrier, Captain.”

“Well, thank you, for giving him a chance,” Steve said, lightly gripping his friend’s shoulder. Victor nodded at him and began to speak to a child with a burned face in low tones. Steve stepped back and away, he had been with Darcy on the visit where she accidentally saw Victor sans-mask, he knew from her that facial damage was a subject he shouldn’t intrude on. Besides, the team was waiting for him to finish up the social call that by necessity came of using Latverian land for any part of a mission. Victor had tacitly dismissed him by switching to a language he knew Steve didn’t know, so it was alright to leave. He smiled at the nurses on the way out, since it never hurt to be nice to the nurses.

“Steve, what’s the hold up?” Darcy asked on J-comm. “Are you playing with the kids or coming to help us bust up a base?”

“Hold your horses, Angel,” he laughed, cutting through the back alley behind the hospital. “I’m coming as fast as feet can take me.” Thanks to certain hero-types not understanding the rules of engagement, Doomstadt’s hospitals, schools, and elder-care facilities were all at the very edge of the city, as far as possible from the castle, which would have been difficult to move. It made them less likely to be collateral, and meant he could jog from NDRH to the base in a few minutes. Latveria itself simply being small helped too.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to rush you. I’m just anxious, since it’s taken me way too long to track this place down, for all it’s on the front porch of an ally. We promised Barra we’d handle this last year.”

“And he knows he was moved around a lot and had his mind messed with, which means he couldn’t point us to the lab right away. It was basically luck that Scott made some sort of contact in the Quantum Realm, and that Tony noticed it on his scans, and that we’d made Hank come home with you to keep an eye on him so he was there to help crack the case, and that Gunn had a vision and made us call Barra over when Hank figured out where they were. A lot of dominos had to fall just right, and none of them could have fallen faster if you did something different.” Steve sighed as Darcy remained silent. “You can’t be everywhere, Angel.”

“No, no, I know that,” she said, slightly breathless. “I wasn’t quiet because I disagree with you, I had to go referee an argument between Thor and Tony about magic again.”

“Tony’s not the most flexible scientist, is he?” Steve asked, entering the forest.

“He’s broken enough barriers that he’s uncomfortable with the idea that the few he can’t are semi-permeable,” Darcy said, beginning her usual grumble about the unique difficulty of herding the
super-smart cats she worked with, as opposed to the lesser cats she was able to delegate herding of. Steve snorted in amusement as he rounded the turn in the path that led to the temporary base. Someone Agent Peace knew had loaned them a campsite with enough room to park the quinjet and pop up a mobile medic’s tent, but most of them were living in various inns in Doomstadt as economic reparation to the Latverian people for the potential risk they represented.

“Fair enough,” Steve allowed, cutting her off with a hug from behind. She tensed for half a second, then leaned back into him. He may have hated the perpetual suspicion his wife lived with, but he loved the feeling of her giving it up, secure nothing could hurt her while he was at her back.

“What’s the play?”

“Large and in charge,” Bucky informed him, exiting the quinjet with a gun Steve didn’t quite recognise. He wasn’t aware of new purchases of armaments, but Bucky had enough fans in Sci-Div that it could have been a present. “We go in fast, hot, and heavy, bust up the labs, wreak some havoc, set some Nazis on fire if we get a chance.”

“By we he means you two, Thor, Tony, and Hulk,” Darcy said, taking the lead of the mission brief seamlessly. Hulk perked up, going from mossy boulder to teammate faster than Steve could blink.

“Make a mess, gentlemen. Have a party if you want. But keep. Them. Distracted. Natasha, Clint, Sam, and I will be search and rescue, pulling out victims and tracking down the stolen artifacts. Jane and Betty are on containment here at the base for whatever we bring back, as well as helping with any medical problems until we get back to the Tower.”

“I’m containment,” Jane said pointedly. “Betty is medical. I will duct tape you if you try to bleed on me.”

“Conversely, handing me anything radioactive that isn’t my boyfriend or Hulk will get you slapped,” Betty continued from her station by the medical tent. Everyone nodded, they all understood triggers, even if those triggers weren’t the most useful in their line of work.

“Okay, let’s move,” Darcy said, pulling away from him to stand by her team. Steve signaled Thor and Tony for their flight paths, and bumped Hulk’s fist with his own when it was offered. He might never have thought it’d be seventy years after he went into the ice and he’d still be hunting Hydra in the woods of Europe, but at least he could still do it with family.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Sticky-fingers: slang for a tendency to steal.

Notes:
Fun Home was a musical first shown in 2013 based on the auto-biographical graphic novel of the same name by Alison Bechdel of Bechdel Test fame.

Johansen is a Stark Industries scientist OC, a non-binary chemist who got a doctorate for the primary goal of having a gender neutral prefix (Dr.). Riri is Riri Williams, the teen mechanical prodigy who in the comic duplicates Tony’s suit and fights as Ironheart. As a hint of what sorts of things Darcy and Ian are pissed by, Johansen is NB and Riri is a black woman.

By "Victor's house" Tony means Castle Doom in Doomstadt.
Hank is a master manipulator, and while he genuinely believes what he's saying about the risks of continuing to build supersuits, he's doing so in a way that puts Tony on the spot to fix the problem, rather than fix it himself. That absolves him (in his mind) of guilt if the fix isn't possible, and places it on Tony. That's classic emotional abuse, but Tony isn't familiar with this style, having had verbal assault contrasted with grooming for exploitation from Howard and Stane. He's not used to people fucking him up subtly for the sake of it, and Hank's not actively asking him to build him anything. Jarvis detects a problem, but is unsure of how to bring it up, hence being rude and abrupt but not calling Hank out.

Occam's Razor is the problem-solving principle that the simplest solution tends to be the right one. In this case, the simplest solution is that Tony is lying about not knowing what Stane was doing, and changed his mind in Afghanistan. That's not true, but since it's simplest, many people will believe it regardless of proof.

Jane's knowledge of first aid consists of 'keep blood inside body' and as such her main solution is to duct tape shut wounds. Betty on the other hand has trauma from her work with Bruce on Gamma and she hates dealing with unknown sources of radiation. Luckily, they both know teamwork and can split the jobs accordingly.

Teaser:

"I want to ease humanity’s growing pains, help us make the step in a controlled way, a predictable way. Let us avoid all that survival of the fittest.”
Chapter 91

Chapter Summary

The fight wraps up, with mixed results.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Dragon Moon, Shadows_of_Shemai, Snowecat, quadrad, Beth_Mac, Joey99, hhhellcat, Crystallea1321, Tsita, willowfire, SionnachOiche3, and Banmosi.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The corridor was dark, lit only by emergency lights, not well maintained either. Although the bunker itself was well-defended, complete with a force field powered by the Chitauri Scepter, all places that house humans have certain commonalities.

To put it another way, everyone poops.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Sam whispered onto the coms. “The sewers? Really? What, are we invading Castle Wolfenstein now?”

“I have enhanced senses and Barton breathes through his mouth while aiming,” Natasha said bluntly. “Trust me, you do not have the worst of it, Wilson.”

“Can we please maintain radio silence?” Darcy asked them both. She’d found a ladder, rusty and stained with questionable fluids though it was.

“Why? You gonna turn this mission around?” Clint laughed in a whisper. She rolled her eyes. At least he had the knack of speaking so he couldn’t really be heard without Jarvis filtering his words.

“If I have to, Barton, now shut up, I’m going up,” she said, and rested her weight on the bottom rung.

At the top of the ladder, the trap door gave way with a mildly alarming screech, but as she winced, a boom rocked the ground and she slipped up onto the floor of the janitor’s closet under the cover of alarms going off. Sending a mental thanks to her flash team, she moved to the door and opened it, striding through with purpose. Her team were equipped in dark, standard issue jumpsuits, the kind found everywhere on SHIELD bases, and hopefully here too. As long as she kept her head up and her gait even, she should look like she belonged. A casual trip through a lab let her look at an emergency map, and she smiled grimly. Lab safety was even respected by the forces of evil, wasn’t that nice.

“Map scanned, turn left ahead,” Jarvis informed her, and she pulled a brisk heel turn down the hallway, sending a nervous looking scientist scuttling away from her. “Hazardous storage marked on HUD.”
She blinked to renormalize around the projected red outline of a door to her right flashing on the lenses of her plain black-frame glasses. She pulled out a blank black card and swiped it through the access lock, letting the micro EMPs knock out the lock. It sealed shut, of course, hazard lockers did that as a default, the same way barracks unlock. You wanted people able to escape in an emergency, but you most emphatically did not want anything marked ‘hazardous’ escaping.

“Next?” She muttered, kicking the door before turning with a scowl. Underlings blanched and walked briskly away from what seemed to be an irritated officer.

“Reverse course, five doors,” Jarvis informed her, voice even.

“Um, Angel?”

“What?” she asked, surprised to hear Steve’s voice.

“Do uh… do we know anyone really, um… fast?”

“Tony tried to invite Carmelita Jeter from the last summer olympics to test our training facility, but she turned him down. Why?”

“Because there’s someone out here running circles around everyone and they’re a little… slap-happy.”

“As in acting a fool, or as in they’re slapping you?” she asked, pulling up short in front of the door.

“Yes.”

“Have you tried slapping back?”

“No, they slap the bad guys too. I thought they might be yours.”

“Steve, you’re allowed to defend yourself. Slap back.”

“Okay… FUCK!”

Darcy froze, one hand on the key reader of her current target.

“He is well, Sister. The blurry one is a skilled warrior, but the Captain remains unharmed.”

“In all but dignity,” Bucky laughed. “Greased Lightning pushed him down a hill and into a mud puddle.”

“Ha. Ha,” Steve goused, and Darcy felt her heartbeat restart.

“Focus, please,” she requested. “And don’t antagonize the speedster anymore.”

“Now she tells me,” Steve grumbled.

“I will make you pineapple upside down cake to apologize,” she promised, and clicked her tongue to let Jarvis know she needed focus. He lit her glasses with a red line, leading her on, and turned down her comms.

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“This reminds me of when we were kids.”
Steve wiped the mud from his face and scowled at Bucky. “Because I’ve been knocked down in mud and you’re still looking like a movie star?”

“Because you’re wading into a fight and I’m backing you up,” Bucky said. “And because you’re adorable when you’ve got mud on your face. Like snips and snails and puppy dog tails.”

“Up yours, Barnes,” Steve shot back, aware it wasn’t his most creative retort.

“Promise?” Bucky asked with a leer.

“If the parents could stop flirting please, I have a doorway waiting for you,” Tony announced. Steve and his husband turned and jogged towards the base in a steady, ground eating pace. They ducked into what might have been a main hall once, or a cafeteria before it was filled with computers and metal shelving. Bucky signaled for quiet, and Steve closed his eyes to focus on his hearing.

One breath. Two breaths. A footstep.

Steve opened his eyes and flicked out his shield, catching an officer in the knees. Not just any officer, either.

“Baron Strucker. Hydra’s number one thug.”

“Technically,” the Baron tried, “I’m a thug for SHIELD.”

“Well” Bucky said, squaring up on the other side of the Hydra leader, “then technically you’re fired.”

“Come on, Buck, don’t play with your food,” Steve chided. He smiled at Strucker. “We’re here because a friend misplaced something of his. Where’s Loki’s scepter?”


“It has truly amazing abilities,” Strucker enthused. It was kind of creepy. “Not just control, no. That is the bluntest use of such an infinitely complex and subtle tool. Loki was a fool to use a scalpel as a sword.”

“Uh. Huh.” Steve gave him an unimpressed look. “Loki was a prisoner of war throwing away his shot, using it least effectively on purpose. What did you do with it?”

“Why, I did what Hydra has always done, always wanted. I saved humanity.”

“Bull shit,” Bucky snapped.

“Omelettes and eggs, Sergeant Barnes, omelettes and eggs,” Strucker purred. “Not that I approve of what was done to you of course. Arnim was a creature of his time, he had no sense of perspective. One man made into a weapon, no matter how strong, will never be enough to save us, to elevate us. No, what we need is to become more, as a species. To expand our minds and reach our next stage of evolution. Nature has already begun, but as with many things, nature is messy. Mutation at random, hoping for the best and letting the million unlucky die for the one who moves forward. I want to ease humanity’s growing pains, help us make the step in a controlled way, a predictable way. Let us avoid all that survival of the fittest.”
“You want to pick and choose the mutants,” Steve said, putting it together and feeling sick as he did so. “Pick their powers. Grow an army of loyal, enhanced, mind controlled soldiers. You’re sick.”

“I am humanity’s defender!” Strucker snapped, and Steve knocked his head with the shield, letting him slump to the floor.

“We have Strucker,” Bucky said, putting a hand on Steve’s shoulder. Steve fought down his gut and leaned on his husband.

“Haz-mat lockers secure,” Darcy informed them.

“I’ve got an armload of weird ass trinkets for Doc Foster,” Sam said.

“I have the scepter,” Tony announced in a flat tone. Steve frowned, Tony didn’t usually sound like that when he reported in.

“We almost had the prisoners,” Natasha gasped. “But they spooked, and I’m in route with Barton back to the base, he needs a doctor.”

“Had… worse.” Clint sounded awful, and Steve refocused on the downed teammate.

“You’re a fucking liar,” Natasha said, sharp and angry.

“Budapest.” There was a rattle in his voice, like a punctured lung.

“You and I remember Budapest very differently.” Her tone was the same, but Steve caught a tiny thickness, a hidden sob.

“Breathe shallowly, Clint,” he ordered. “Jarvis, get Helen prepping at the tower, and let Betty know she has an incoming. Thor, can you round up any surviving grunts and put them on a truck?”

“Aye, Captain.”

“I’ll meet you at the motor pool,” Bucky said, stepping away from Steve. He wasn’t needed if Steve could give orders. Steve always held on when he was giving orders.

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Tony was the first in the base. Of course he was, he’d used the suit like a battering ram to break the castle’s defenses. The resulting explosion kicked up a suitable amount of dust to cover for Jarvis taking over with Iron Man while Tony had a little look-see at the computers. The data he found was easily enough to keep the elderly in ops for months, and he smiled as he set it to download. Show Hydra to mess with this family.

“I know you’re hiding more than files,” he muttered as he looked around the mostly empty server room. “Hey, J, give me an IR scan of the room real quick, would ya.”

“One moment Sir.” Tony heard the staccato chatter of micro guns and then Jarvis was back, as unflappable as ever. “The wall to your left…I’m reading steel reinforcement and an air current.”

“Please be a secret door, please be a secret door, please be a secret door…” Tony wasn’t even hiding his childlike glee when the wall slid open at a touch. “Yay!”

The doorway led to a stair, and the stair led to a cavern, carved from natural rock by some process probably involving wind, water, and geologic time. It was beautiful, but despite that, Tony couldn’t focus on anything but the room’s contents. Chitauri artifacts filled shelves and racks, a large segment
of Leviathan, the flying turtle eels, was mounted on the wall like a trophy. Tony saw the scorch marks from his repulsors on its face.

“Hey big guy, been a while. No hard feelings, yeah?” he chuckled, trying to fight down a growing unease. “Guys, I found the scepter.”

No reply.

“Guys? Jarvis?” The cavern echoed on his voice, distorting it. Tony moved to grab the scepter. “It’s okay, it’s fine. Just the rock blocking the signal. The creepy, creepy cave rock.”

A clatter behind him caught his attention, and Tony whirled to meet the threat, palms up. A hand closed on his, around the cool metal of the scepter, and lightly on his forehead. Darkness welled up and surrounded him.

*Sounds like a cold world, Tony.*

...*tear us apart.*

“Bruce? Was that you? Bruce, where are you?”

*You’re not worthy. This could’ve been avoided if you hadn’t played with something you don’t understand.*

“Thor? What the fuck man, help me understand!”

*I had this, um, dream. The kind that seems normal at the time, but when you wake…*

*What did you dream?*

*That I was an Avenger. That I was anything more than the assassin they made me.*

“Natasha, no, you are an Avenger, you’re family!”

...*tear us apart.*

*I guess you’d know. Whether you tell us is a bit of a question. Every time someone tries to win a war before it starts, innocent people die. Every time.*

“Steve?”

...*tear us apart.*

*You could have saved us. Why didn’t you do more?*

“Steve! Steve!”

...*tear us apart, and I’m the man who killed the Avengers. I saw them all dead, I felt it. The whole world, too. It’s because of me. I didn’t do all I could. I’m the one who killed us.*

“Oh god… this is a vision of the future, isn’t it?”

*I don’t feel so good. I’m sorry… I don’t want to go…*

“HARLEY!!” Tony surged up and away from the inky blackness covering his eyes. His son was in danger, damnit, and he was going to fight for him. Fingers twitched, a repulsor fired, and Tony was
left gasping on the cavern floor. He picked the scepter up and climbed the stairs.

“I have the scepter.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Flash team: the flashy, noisy group drawing attention.
Slap-happy: can mean the almost-drunk feeling of having a mild concussion, or be the unarmed equivalent of trigger happy.
Greased Lightning: a nickname for Pietro.
IR scan: infrared scan

Notes:
Castle Wolfenstein is the Nazi super-science base in the Wolfenstein games, which in Bodies-verse are loosely based on what was declassified from Steve's adventures with the Howlies, and from the more fictional accounts in the Captain America comics.

Carmelita Jeter is an American sprinter who ran in the 2012 summer Olympics and is the 2nd fastest woman in history to run the 100m dash.

Snips and snails and puppy dog tails, that's what little boys are made of is the rhyme Bucky references.

Nazis are gross and their rhetoric is hard to write. I did my best with Strucker's logic, but I would appreciate any concrit anyone has on it. How's it rank from "Man, shut the hell up" to "Cool motive, still murder"? Let me know in the comments!

Jarvis is flying the Iron Man suit the way he flies the Iron Legion for crowd control. In this particular case, he's flying it instead of the Iron Legion, due to Tony being better informed about local sentiment and the team still having access to SHIELD agents for crowd control.

Order of events:
Pietro has is freed from his cage by Hydra to act as a distraction/interference, expecting his sister's captivity to hold him in the general area even if he doesn't strictly speaking obey. He's also more messed up mentally in terms of his ability to fight brainwashing than Wanda, so he does sort of do as they ask. Wanda eventually frees herself in the chaos, comes face-to-face with Tony, who's first reaction is to aim at her with repulsors because he's already freaked out. She goes digging in his head to stop that, where she and Tony discover some averted potential futures (lines from the AoU movie and IW movie) that really fuck him up. He hears Peter's voice and reacts as though it's Harley, since he doesn't know Peter yet and the emotion that goes with it says 'son' to him. That causes him to break free and fire on her, but Pietro grabs her before the blast, and they run away. Nat and Clint met them during the running part, and Clint got punched in the liver while Pietro was at speed, the effect being similar to a large caliber bullet, minus shrapnel.
“Fuck off, Steve, my son is dead!”
“I thought your children were at boarding school,” Hank asked, looking pale and sick.
Chapter 92

Chapter Summary

The calm between the storms is interrupted, and so is Bucky's hot and sexy night with his lovers.

Warnings:
Unprotected sex scene with light BDSM aspects
Villainous Interruptus
Perceived Character Death

Chapter Notes

Love fest! To Tsita, Snowecat, quadrad, willowfire, hhhellcat, SionnachOiche3, ClockWeasel, Shadows_of_Shemai, Joey99, and Selene_Aduial.

Heads up! I don't kill Jarvis, he does not die at this time. The Avengers think he has, but I did not do that, please put down the torches and pitchforks. Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The team was sore and exhausted by the time Helen and Betty announced that Helen’s new regeneration cradle had completely healed Clint. Darcy had insisted they all take showers while the doctors worked on him, but nobody had done more than a fast dip under barely heated running water for the sake of not stinking. Mostly because nobody wanted to be too far from Clint if things went bad. Or good, for that matter.

“Okay, let’s leave the cute couple to bill and coo,” Darcy suggested with a yawn, leading the team away from where Natasha was cuddling Clint in his plush hospital-style bed. Tony had sprung for the best in their med bay. “Everyone get some rack time. Big days coming up, we all need our beauty sleep, my PR team can only do so much.”

“Can we have cake?” Tony asked.

“Cake?”

“At the celebration party?” The genius blinked at her. “We scored a major win. We got Strucker, we locked down the scepter. There should be a party.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Thor chimed in. “A victory should be honored with revels.”

“After we find out what else the scepter has been used for,” Darcy told them. “I don’t just mean weapons.”

“Greased Lightning,” Bucky murmured, and Darcy tapped her nose.
“Since when is Strucker, the hardware tech goon of Hydra, capable of human enhancement?” Steve asked, picking up on her line of thought.

“And where did our little quantum friend go?” Natasha asked, catching up. “We found the cell, but they’d either broken out or been released, and I didn’t see the magic user at all.”

“To be fair, I didn’t actually see the speedster either,” Steve pointed out.

“Well, these are fun questions,” Tony groused. “Why aren’t you with birdbrain?”

“He’s asleep,” Natasha said. “And Bruce is waking up from his Hulk nap, and Betty wanted some privacy. I have enhanced senses, it’s polite to leave the suite, not just the room, but Clint is deaf and can sleep though takeoff on a airship carrier.”

“Come on, guys,” Darcy reminded her team. “We all need sleep. The investigation can wait until we’re rested, we’re only human.”

“Yeah, only human,” Tony said, nodding at her. “I’m gonna go ask Pym to manage some data crunching for me, since he’s had the day off napping or playing bingo or whatever. I’ll sleep after, sound good?”

“Sounds great. Tony, I’m glad you two worked out your problems.” Darcy hugged him. “You’ve been so great helping hold this team together. I know it’s not easy for you, but without your support, I think everything going on these past few months would tear us apart.”

“Heh, yeah. I’m a peach,” Tony laughed, and she let go, willing to let him recover his facade. He didn’t strictly need it among family, but she knew how masks could help you cope.

“Welp, I am dead on my feet, I need to hit the z’s even if I don’t want to go. See you tomorrow Tony.”

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The world was not a fair place, Bucky reflected, but sometimes it managed to be a kind one. Well, kind was a relative term when it came to his loves teaming up to drive him nutty in their bed. Steve was behind him, supporting Bucky’s back and pressing his hard cock up between Bucky’s legs, as Darcy gave them both a lap dance of unprecedented sinfulness. His hands, as per his own request, were being held to the mattress, which meant he didn’t have to worry about hurting anyone, but also made it impossible to touch either of them. The resulting effect was robbing him of what little brain he retained in the presence of naked Darcy to start with.

“Should… uh. Shouldn’t we get condoms on?” he asked in a desperate bid to buy some time to focus himself. He was embarrassingly ready to go, even for foreplay as tailored to his kinks as this. “I don’t want to push your limits, Doll.”

“Bucky,” she purred, gyrating an upward motion along their shafts, “pushing limits is kind of the point. I’ll avoid bare penetration, but just stroking you like this… I can always get a dose of Plan B tomorrow if it would make you feel better.”

“What’re ya talking about, I feel great,” Bucky mumbled and Steve laughed, shifting their weight to tangle Bucky’s twitching left leg with his own. Darcy smirked at them and leaned forward, shimmying from a height that put her glorious breasts in his face, all the way down to lick their leaking shafts. Bucky swore and thrashed as she pushed him right to the edge, then gasped when she pulled back long enough to let him catch his breath.
“Deep breaths, Buck,” Steve murmured in his ear, the hot breath making Bucky’s cock twitch again. “Nice and even. You’re starting to sound like I did.”


“If you insist,” Steve laughed, “But shouldn’t we let Angel here finish before we do that?”

“Oh, I’m not complaining,” Darcy purred, reaching down to slide a finger in her slick folds. “I’m a strong, independent woman, I can take care of myself. You two do what you must.”

Bucky growled and leveled a gaze he knew told her just what he thought of that. Namely, that it was hot as fuck but should be tried another day. “Get your pretty butt over here, Doll.”

“Uh-uh, say the magic word,” she teased, standing just far enough away that he could see her hand vigorously working her clit. Her eyes squeezed shut and Bucky felt his heart pause.

“Please, Doll, please, come here, touch me, I’m begging you. Please come rub yourself all over me, please.”

Darcy let out a low and sexy moan and then the next he knew, she was on them again, rubbing, pushing, holding her tits to his face so he could kiss and suck them as her hips danced her bush over their cocks.

Bucky came with a crashing roar that shook the room, Steve seconds behind him.

Wait.

Shook the room?

“What in the fuck!” he shouted as plaster dust rained from the ceiling.

“Jarvis, status update!” Darcy demanded, grabbing the satin housedress he’d bought her for her birthday as she crossed their room. Bucky snatched his pants from the floor and jammed them on commando. Steve grabbed a pair of boxers with one hand and his shield with the other. The three of them rounded the door to their suite in partial dress as an Iron Legion suit slammed Iron Man through the upper floor.

“Reboot, Legionnaire! Jarvis, buddy, we got a buggy suit.”

““There was a terrible noise…” the suit said, and Bucky realized this wasn’t just a suit, it was a person. Although how anyone could steal a suit from under both Tony and Jarvis’ noses was beyond him. “I was tangled in… in…strings. I had to kill the other guy.”

“You killed someone?” Steve asked, sounding appalled. “Who?”

“He was a good guy,” the intruder said mournfully, lifting Tony by the chest. No. By the arc reactor. Bucky froze.

“Put Tony down,” he ordered calmly.

“This violence.” the voice was emoting, but not quite right. Like Jarvis in the early days, before he’d been willing to treat them as family, when he was hiding behind the idea of a butler. It sent a chill through Bucky’s spine. “Wouldn’t have been my first call. But, down in the real world we’re faced with ugly choices.”

“I’m aware of that. The difference,” Steve said quietly, “between heroes and villains is, villains
make that ugly choice the the expense of others. Heroes make the sacrifice play. Now put Tony down, and tell me what you want.”

“I know what he wants,” Tony said. “Peace in our time. Meet Ultron, a global peacekeeping initiative.”

“Yeah,” Darcy drawled, “looks real peaceful.”

“I’m sorry,” Ultron said sincerely. “I know you mean well. You just didn’t think it through. You want to protect the world, but you don’t want it to change. How is humanity saved if it’s not allowed to… evolve?”

“I think I heard that same line somewhere else, recently,” Steve muttered.

“There is only one path to peace,” Ultron growled. “The Avengers’ extinction.”

“Stark!” shouted Thor from above. “Ready Overkill!”

“Ready!” Tony shouted, and a bolt of lightning plunged into the tower, whiting out everything. When it faded, Bucky’s ears were ringing and Jane was probing his metal arm.

“So quick question, what the fuck?”

In the burned out remains of the lab, the Avengers were trying to put the pieces back together. Some, more literally than others.

“All our work is gone,” Pym announced, looking up from a tablet. “Ultron cleared out, used the internet as an escape hatch.”

Bruce grunted and hefted a backup hard drive onto a counter. “That fits, he’s gone through our surveillance files, too. He knows what we knew.”

“Um…” Sam was looking shocky in a way Steve didn’t think had to do with the arm he’d broken during the robotic assault. “He’s in the spysassin squad’s creepily thorough files, he’s in the internet. What if he decides to access something a little more exciting?”

“Oh god, nuclear codes,” Maria breathed beside him. Sam reached his unbroken arm out to comfort his lover, and everyone took a second to feel the fear. It wouldn’t do them any good sitting there clogging up their brains, better to feel it and move on.

“I need to make some calls, assuming we still can,” Darcy announced, “who wants to buddy-system me?”

“I will accompany you, Sister,” Thor said, pushing off the wall. “It grows irksome to chase that Norns-damned scepter from villain to villain.”

“Why would he nuke us, though?” Natasha asked. “He said he wanted us dead, yes, but that seems like overkill.”

“He didn’t say dead,” Bucky pointed out. “He said extinct.”

“Yes, well, he also mentioned murder when he attacked me,” Hank said crossly. “And everyone who lives here is accounted for. There’s nobody else in the building this time of night.”
Steve stood from where he’d been working on fixing Tony’s Candyland sign to intercept the angry billionaire before he could throttle Pym. “Deep breath Tony, like we practiced.”

“Fuck off, Steve, my son is dead!”

“I thought your children were at boarding school,” Hank asked, looking pale and sick. “You said…”

“I told you I asked Jarvis to inherit the family business, Pym,” Tony snarled. “He was a fully emergent AI with opinions, feelings, thoughts of his own. A person, a person I made. Jarvis was my son and I built the bastard that killed him.”

Steve pulled Tony into his arms and rocked. The keening sound wasn’t loud, but it vibrated the metal casing of the reactor against Steve’s chest. “Hank, I would highly suggest you not downplay the sacrifice Jarvis was asked to make as our first line of defense. Tony’s a good enough dad that you might not survive that in one piece. And I know he didn’t build this Ultron creep on his own, so I’m less inclined than usual to be his better angel, understand?”

There was a moment of tense silence, broken when Darcy whirled back in.

“Maria, Fury is recalling you to HQ, Sam you’re going with her as far as medical. Heal up, man.” The two nodded and began moving, and Darcy flicked a picture up from her tablet to a stretch of wall. It was pixelated and static-covered, but the gore was clear. “Ultron is sending us a message. Any guesses what it says? Aside from the obvious.”

“Why would he send a message? He just spent an unjustifiably long time lecturing us at close quarters,” Natasha complained. “Did he think we wouldn’t get it? Monologuing is one thing, but this is just insulting.”

“It’s a diversion,” Tony said, pulling away from Steve to look at the word ‘peace’ crudely scrawled in blood. “He was covering up why he killed Strucker. It’s what I would do.”

Steve looked at Tony and raised a brow.

“What? He’s at least 30% my code. I know how he’s supposed to think, and based on the records of how Jarvis… of what went wrong, I know what skipped the track isn’t his intelligence, it’s his emotions. He’s angry, but he’s smart. Like an evil me.” Tony grabbed a stool and perched. “His first step was to divide us up, attack us from multiple fronts, and secure an exit in the form of an upload. That’s strategy, Steve. What makes a strategist pull a Banksy at a crime scene?”

“Psy-ops,” Steve answered. “Kilroys and red herrings.”

“Strucker knew something,” Natasha concluded. “But our files are toast. Everything we had on him is gone.”

“Not everything,” Tony grimaced. “I owe Steve ten bucks. To the archives.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Bill and coo: to be sweet and sappy with each other.
Rack time: sleep.
Plan B: a post-sex birth control.
Commando: without underwear.
Legionnaire: Jarvis' super-persona, a set of suits with limited fighting capabilities used mainly for crowd control or evacuation and rescues.
Buddy-system: going together, to increase safety.
Banksy: a political street artist.
Red herrings: diversions.

Notes:
Darcy has noted they have a problem about celebrating too soon, and is trying to avoid that. However, Tony needs to feel validated as a hero who won, so that ends up making him feel like he's not doing enough and giving the Ultron plan a final push. If Darcy knew that, she'd back off and give Tony the support he wants, cake included, but Tony is still crap at asking for help from people when he's emotionally compromised. He's trying for strong, and getting hurt doing it.

Yes, the sex scene is unprotected. Everyone involved is married to each other, has no other sexual partners, no diseases, and even if they're not planning on kids, it's not super unsafe, especially since they're not doing penetrative sex. That said, even pre-ejaculate can have sperm in it, depending on relative fertility, so Bucky is right, there's a risk of pregnancy involved in this. Darcy is okay with that risk, as was Bucky when they negotiated the scene, he's just trying to get himself a little bit of space to calm down in, without admitting he's close to premature ejaculation.

Overkill is a move Thor and Tony have practiced, where Thor hits the arc reactor with lightning as Tony fires the unibeam, overloading the electrons in the air between them and letting Tony unleash a gigantic shock wave of power. Tony has more control of that if Jarvis is his co-pilot, but even on his own he can make a big boom out of lightning and repulsor bursts.

Hank may be a dick and a horrible father figure, but he doesn't actually approve of child murder. He was under the impression that the only "kids" involved were off at Xavier's, and because it's how he and Howard did it, that the kids were there so that their parents could work uninterrupted. He's sickened by the idea he might have helped make something that killed children, and disturbed by how strongly Tony is reacting, since he didn't process Jarvis as offspring, but as a really awesome invention.

Steve likes analogue backups, also known as paper archives. Tony made a bet for ten dollars once that they'd end up locking away or killing Strucker before they ever needed the paper copies, and he's acknowledging he lost that bet.

Teaser:

"The one superpower plain old Bruce Banner has is emotional repression, and I'm going to use it to protect the innocent kid living inside me."
Chapter 93

Chapter Summary

Searches and rescues on all sides.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To quadrad, Joey99, Tsita, Shadows_of_Shemai, SionnachOichte3, Beth_Mac, willowfire, Selene_Aduial, hhhellcat, Banmosi, and psyche29.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I really wish I could just crowdsorce this,” Darcy complained for the fifth time. “I miss my minions.”

“I miss the internet,” Bruce said calmly. “But we’ve both gone without before. It’s not safe to turn the routers back on, since we’re kind of fighting the internet gone evil.”

“How are you this calm?” Natasha asked him, as she spread out another packet of mug shots.

“I have to be, Hulk is in no shape to be up front.” Bruce rubbed his eyes with one hand. “Guys, we were in the lab last night, looking for Tony. He watched Jarvis get… he saw that. The only person in our family bigger than Hulk, and also the first person close to him to, y’know, die. He’s terrified and grieving. The one superpower plain old Bruce Banner has is emotional repression, and I’m going to use it to protect the innocent kid living inside me.”

Darcy nodded. “Makes sense. So Hulk is considered walking wounded for the fight. Damn, with Sam grounded, and Tony on the edge, we lost two flyers, and with Hulk on the wounded list, we’re out two heavy hitters too. We can’t use the internet, and Fury is having an aneurysm over security, so SHIELD is mostly scrambled to help guard the secrets and keep Ultron out of the various vaults of nastiness. Someone give me good news.”

“I know an arms dealer,” Tony said, his first words since he’d sat down with a box of files. His voice bordered on manic. “Actually I know many arms dealers, there are these conventions, you meet people, not important. But I specifically know this guy.”

He stood and pinned a mug shot to the corkboard on the war room wall. “Ulysses Klaue,” Darcy read from under the picture. “Tell me about him.”

“Operates off the African coast, black market arms and ammo, specifically high tech arms and ammo, acquired from people who maybe didn’t plan on sharing it. He was totally obsessed with finding something new, a game changer, it was all very Ahab.”

“He has been branded as a thief,” Thor pointed out. Darcy looked at him. “All-Speak is very useful sometimes.”
“Um, looks like an obscure African dialect,” Bruce said, looking from the picture to his tablet.

“No, no. I had Jarvis download some language texts for me. The Harrow kids keep teaching Hulk languages I don’t know, and I need to keep up. I’m not sure why he picked this one for me, though. I’ve never heard them speak, uh, Wa’canada? Wakana… Wakandan. Yeah, Wakandan.”

“Well shit, if he got out of Wakanda with ore….” Tony looked pale. “Or worse, ingots of refined metal….”

“You dad said he’d used the last of it,” Steve said, matching Tony’s look. Bucky swallowed painfully and Darcy started swearing under her breath.

“Wait, I’m lost. What’s in Wakanda?” Bruce asked.

“Vibranium,” Natasha told him. The green he turned had nothing to do with Hulk.

For all they’d done a fair amount of traveling to various places for various reasons, Steve had never actually been to South Africa. It was nice, warm and sunny, and the buildings made him want a sketchbook and an hour to draw. Sadly, they exited Johannesburg quickly, dropping Bruce and Betty off at the local government offices before going out towards Klaue’s base in a defunct shipyard. The two more diplomatic members of the team could help explain the Avenger’s presence and actions, and get the locals started on containing Ultron’s impact on their country’s electronic infrastructure. Plus, it kept non-combatants away from the mess they expected.

Speaking of mess, The happened to breach the shipyard as Klaue’s arm went one way, and his body went the other. Darcy signalled she had it, and Steve continued up the stairs as Thor and Tony bantered with Ultron, keeping his attention.

“Psst, you two,” he whispered, waving at the twins from half a deck down, between the bars of the safety rails. “Are you alright? Has he hurt you?”

“He got us vengeance,” the man of the two sneered. “What have you gotten us?”

“Not as much as we promised,” Steve admitted honestly. “I’m sorry it took us so long to find the Sokovia base, I’m sorry the rescue went so wrong.”

“Stark nearly killed my sister,” he snarled, blurring and reappearing beside Steve.

“She plunged him into a hyper-realistic nightmare about destroying his own family, though, if we’re being fair.” The young man moved to slap him and Steve grabbed his arm. “No. We did that already. Not again. You can’t keep almost killing my family and getting forgiven, even if we did promise Barra we’d save you.”

“He almost killed her long before her powers.” Silver eyes closed off behind pain. “Wanda doesn’t deserve that.”

Steve sighed. “And you think you do?”

“I’ve been made a weapon, a tool of Hydra.”
“So’s my husband.”

The young man was about to reply when Ultron’s attacks turned towards them. Steve grabbed him and spun, taking the minigun shots on the shield on his back and trying to provide cover. A red film bubbled up around him, and he lost his footing on reality.

*Hello Captain.*

“Who are you?” Steve whirled around, looking at the empty dance hall around him. He hated this place, most of his nightmares started here. At least the skeletal band was missing, that was a plus, even if he couldn’t see who’d spoken.

*Not so loud please, and if you could look distressed, yes. Like that. I need you to take my brother, he needs help you can give him, and I cannot. I must stay with the Stone, I’m sorry I can’t tell you why.*

“Who...“ Steve cut off with a frown. He knew who, there were limited people who could do anything like this and who had brothers. She wasn’t present, not that he could see, but he knew what she was asking.

*Thank you Captain.*

“I never said I agree.”

Wanda Maximoff stepped out of a fold of scarlet light, wearing a dancing dress that fit the hall, but not the look on her face. She looked ready to face a firing squad.

“You didn’t have to. In all probabilities, in all worlds, in every thread that runs through you, you help people hurt by Hydra. My brother has been hurt by Hydra, and he needs your help. You always help.” She smiled at him. “For that, thank you, Captain.”

She reached out and tapped his nose with one finger, and the scarlet light shattered around him, leaving him gasping and clutching at Pietro Maximoff, who was also gasping. Steve looked up, and sat down hard on the cobblestone pavers.

“Steve?” Bruce asked, rushing across the courtyard of the American Embassy in Johannesburg. “Steve, are you all right?”

“Medic,” Steve said. “Kid needs a medic.”

“Fuck you old man,” Pietro spat.

“No thanks, I’m married,” Steve retorted. “And I was just teleported after your sister strong armed me into taking care of you. She’s much scarier than you are, and she made a convincing case, and you’re also heaving on your chest like you can’t get enough air, so you’re going to the goddamn medic!”

“Steve just swore. You’re new, so I’ll let you know, that means you see the medic,” Bruce said gently. “Steve swearing means he’s in war mode. Darcy or Bucky swearing means it’s Tuesday. Come on, it’s not so bad. Betty caries candy if you’re good.”

Pietro staggered, but Steve was able to help him stand, and the young man let them lead him inside. The confusion was understandable, but Steve had been given a job, help a victim of Hydra. That, he knew how to do.

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Wanda sighed in relief as she felt the knot of probability loosen. Her brother’s death, once certainty, was now mere chance. Which meant now, she could turn her focus to the metal man beside her, and his rage. It was so close to what the energy that made her felt like, yet so very far from her own. So far, his anger was all she could feel, a low warm wave that lacked the depth of true emotion. It reminded her of some of the Hydra soldiers, the cruelest ones, copying their peers in hatred, yet unable to dip deeper into any other feeling.

“They took Pietro!” she snarled at him, using a language he knew. “We must save him, you have to follow them!”

Ultron whipped a hand out, contacting her jaw in a burst of bright pain. “Don’t tell me what to do!”

Wanda held her jaw in sullen silence from the floor, glaring at the creature. Her silence said more than her injured body could.

“I… I’m sorry, that wasn’t supposed to happen.” Ultron switched from angry to conciliatory much faster than a human man, she supposed because he was operating on circuits and wires, dry, fast electrons and logic gates, not slow wet chemicals in a brain. “I can fix it. We’re going to see a doctor. She can help you, and help me. Then we’ll see about helping your brother.”

Wanda struggled to her feet, one hand still on her cheek, where a knot was forming. This was the way, she could feel it, a band of bright energy at her feet, a ruby road leading her onwards. She just had to take the steps, one at a time.

For Pietro, she could.

In Seoul, Wanda let the subverted doctor treat her face, mediating the bruise into a light smudge and eliminating the swelling. She refused the bone treatment, though, directing the woman back to the work Ultron had set her to with the scepter’s clumsier power. Wanda didn’t understand anything the doctor said about how the metal they’d brought was special or different, but she knew the woman wouldn’t understand her if she explained what she saw either. The vibranium was fascinating, the play of likelihood in its matrix sparkling like Pietro’s silver eyes as he played a particularly funny prank, or flirted with a pretty girl.

It was life and vibrancy, crystalized into a humming white metal.

“How long will it take?” she asked.

“Cellular cohesion will take a few hours, but we can initiate the consciousness stream before that. This is fascinating, I wish we had more of this stuff to study.”

“Oh, you did,” Ultron laughed bitterly. “And it was used to make a Frisbee. Typical humans, they scratch the surface and never think to look within.”

He plucked the blue crystal from the staff, and Wanda felt a sick lurch in her power as the key that unlocked it was wrenched from her plane of existence and crushed. The glittering blue matrix fell to the floor like snow, and she stepped forwards to look in the cradle, grinding the evil to dust beneath her foot. How fitting, that Ultron had just destroyed the one thing that could be used to resurrect him. As Strucker had made her, the one thing that could destroy him. Evil really was short sighted.

“We’re uploading the cerebral matrix… now.”

It won’t be long, she promised the sleeping man. I will do my best to rescue you, as I was rescued. You will not suffer as I have.
No translations.

Notes:
Since they're fighting someone with the proven ability to move through the internet, nobody on the team is using the internet for anything, only downloaded data and voice-only phones. It makes the job harder, but it's much smarter.

Bruce and Hulk have come a long way since the early days. Bruce is finally treating Hulk like the very capable, sort-of-indestructible, seven-year-old child he is, and part of that is making sure he's kept safe, not being forced to come out and protect Bruce, who is the adult in this situation. Hulk's reaction is one of fear and trauma, due to a) witnessing what he believes to be a murder, b) having a close relationship with the perceived murder victim, and c) seeing major damage done to the only person he considers bigger than himself.

Thor has All-Speak, the magical ability to understand all languages. He sees the brand and knows it says "thief" but not what language it comes from. Bruce, on the other hand, has to learn his languages the hard way, and does so for Hulk's sake. Jarvis downloaded a primer on Wakandan even though Hulk hadn't learned it yet because Jarvis knows about Wakanda's tech situation (he's friends with their firewall and helps protect their privacy by doing much more interesting things elsewhere as a distraction when someone notices an internet connection where one shouldn't be.)

Pietro is referencing the death of their parents, and the days spent trapped looking at a Stark bomb, that is their motive for fucking over Tony in the movie. Here, however, Wanda knows directly fucking over Tony fucks over the planet, and has advised against that. Pietro is still rightfully bitter about being a war orphan.

Steve's first time in the abandoned dance hall can be found in Bodies in Time, Chapter 18.

Soldiers do tend to swear. They swore so much in WWII that it was the absence of profanity that signaled intensity, not the addition of profanity. Steve-the-civilian doesn't swear, he thinks it betrays a lack of control on his part. Steve-the-soldier swears every other fucking word. This gives a look at what headspace he's using, so Bruce reacts like a combat medic when Steve swears, and helps Pietro respond the correct way too.

Ultron is a psychopath, and so are many Hydra soldiers. Psychopaths can't fully feel or understand emotions beyond anger, but can copy them to remain undetected. Interestingly, if so inclined, psychopaths who can control their reactions make damn good surgeons because the mental trauma of cutting people open is less and lost patients are frustrating to personal goals, but not a cause of grief. If less inclined to be useful, though, psychopaths can be really dangerous.

Wanda is manipulating Ultron, using her understanding of psychopathy to make him useful to her, and willing to take a few hits to convince him he's in control. Part of surviving being a prisoner was learning to fight from below in a power dynamic that inherently did not favor her, and she's doing it again.
Like many abusers, Ultron cycles through grooming, abuse, reconciliation, and calm. He just does it fast enough you can see the steps clear enough to spot it and get out (except Wanda is using him) due to his fist processing. Most abusers do this slowly, so you normalize at each step and accept it.

The blue matrix around the Mind stone was identified as an AI by Tony in the movie. My headcanon is that Thanos made it to warp the mind stone for the specific uses he wanted Loki to have access to, and block the ones he didn't. So the Scepter is usable for mind control and limited unlocking of pre-existing mental powers (like the things Pietro would need to think at the same speeds he moves) but not for creating a free and autonomous person, as the Stone is clearly capable of. To do that, Thanos basically 'built' a partial person for the mind stone to waste time trying to make whole, aka the psychopathic AI base from which Ultron arose. Without the blueprint in the crystal, no rebuilding of Ultron, but without breaking it, Ultron can't overcome the shortcomings Thanos built in (absence of conscience, logic flaws exhibited by Thanos himself re: the Snap plan, wildly erratic rage cycles, etc.). His choice seems shortsighted to Wanda who only has half that info, but Ultron is actually making a calculated risk at becoming a real boy.

Teaser:

“In the past day and a half, I was interrupted during sex by a killer robot, I’ve lost a friend and teammate, been saddled with a hyperactive mutant prisoner of Nazi mad scientists, teleported through the setting of my worst nightmares, and I really want a sit rep on why I thought I heard a grenade launcher. Darcy, I’m not okay, I’m at war.”
Chapter 94

Chapter Summary

The party splits, and Korea and Oslo may never be the same.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To quadrad, Banmosi, Snowecat, Tsita, Joey99, SionnachOiche3, willowfire, Shadows_of_Shemai, Selene_Aduial, Dragon Moon (DragoonSpirit13), psyche29, and Peramia.

Sorry about the long wait guys, I absolutely hate this movie, but the arc involves some major things I can't afford to just skip out on. So I slog along slow and steady, and we'll get there eventually.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony got the call as they finished up offering reconstruction aid to the South African government for the damage caused in their countryside. Darcy nodded as he stepped out, and smiled at the minister she was discussing arrangements with. She wasn’t too worried, if it had to do with Steve or the boy he’d rescued, the call would have gone to Bucky, if it had to do with Thor, the call would have gone to her. Aside from that, their teammates generally used Steve as their emergency contact, which meant it wasn’t likely to be anything personally destructive. Probably Pepper checking in from her trip to Finland, which could only help.

“Lieutenant, we can take it from here,” Maria interrupted, stepping inside with several agents and Bucky. “Mr. Stark and Drs Banner and Ross are already in route to an urgent situation developing at NEXUS, but I need the rest of you getting on a plane to Korea.”

“What’s in Korea?” Natasha asked, standing and gathering papers to hand to an agent.

“I called Helen about the boy Steve found,” Bucky explained as they stepped out and let the SHIELD personnel take over. “Guess who couldn’t be found literally anywhere by her assistants?”

“Where is Steve, anyways? I haven’t seen him since we got here and checked on him.”

“He’s been keeping Pietro in bed, while Betty and Bruce checked him over. That kid’s worse than Steve was. I’m half surprised he hasn’t challenged anyone to a fight yet.”

“About that…” Thor said, joining them on the helipad where they’d parked the quinjet. “The good Captain and I were unable to dissuade him from joining us in battle against Ultron. He believes his sister must have some plan to defeat the beast, and quite honorably wishes to lend assistance.”

“He’s what, sixteen?” Darcy snorted. “No. He’s a kid. He should be in school. We’ll get him an interview at Xavier’s, but he’s not coming into an active battle zone against a killer robot.”
“His sister already is,” Thor said quietly. “His younger sister. His younger, mentally unstable, extremely chaotic sister.”

“Loki is several centuries older than anyone on the team but you,” Darcy rebutted. “This is totally different.”

“On Asgard, he would be considered barely of age, albeit quite mentally adroit. Much like young Sandra.” Thor looked at her. “And Pietro is twenty, not sixteen.”

“All of that is kind of a moot point, Angel,” Steve said in greeting as they reached the ramp of the quinjet. “Because the real question is, how do you plan to stop him going anywhere? I’d rather he stay in sight.”

“Same,” Clint agreed from the cockpit. “And this is from the guy that kid nearly killed.”

“I can’t believe you’ve turned my team on me,” Darcy grumped at the slim silver blur of vibrating energy standing by the front of the plane. “Sit down and buckle up. You’ll be doing this our way, and that means safety measures.”

Pietro stopped, still as a statue and let out an angry sounding expletive as Steve held out a hand to collect a crumpled bill.

“What, you didn’t see that coming?” Clint mocked. “It’s not like she’s totally unreasonable. Just partially.”

“I know where you sleep, Barton, and you’re not winning any son-in-law points here.”

“Shutting up, Ma’am.”

“Good boy. Now, to Korea, we’ve got a medic to save.”

“I hope you know how much I appreciate you,” Steve told Helen as he prepped a gauze bandage. He hated dealing with the wounded. He’d do it, of course, but it was always so much easier to be the one leaving bloody handprints as you pulled yourself upright on a wall. “You are so much stronger than me.”

“I’ll be fine, Steve, you need to find Ultron, stop him.” Helen coughed and Steve wished Betty had been with them, instead of Bruce and Tony. “The Cradle tech, it’s…”

“Shh, easy now, you got hit mid mass,” Steve said, trying to be comforting. “Go slow. He took a Cradle?”

“He’s building a new body. A better one, from vibranium. Upgrading.”

“How very Cyberman of him.” Steve reached up to tap his comm. “Darcy, you get that?”

“Get what? You were on silent.”

“Fuck, I forgot we didn’t have Jarvis.” Steve sighed. “Sorry Angel. Ultron is using Helen’s Cradle tech to upgrade to a nice new vibranium body.”

“Well that’s some Cyberman body snatching creepiness.” Steve laughed at how they both thought of the same Whoonian villain. “So we blow the Cradle? Ask Helen how much I need to get from Tony for her to replace it.”
Steve asked, and Helen turned a shade that matched her lab coat. “You can’t. It has this… gemstone in it. He pulled it from the scepter, that’s when I broke the control, but the system would have overloaded and caused a meltdown if I pulled the plug at that point. It’s incredibly powerful, if you try to destroy the Cradle…. You have to get it to Stark.”

“We have to find it first.”

“On it!” Darcy chirped. “Also, I found some medics one floor down, I sent them up, they can help Helen. Wait until they get there, then hit the northeast stairwell.”

“Um… where are you?” Steve asked, noting he hadn’t told Darcy Helen was wounded.

“Security office,” she replied cheerfully. “They have all the cameras. And intercom access. People’s faces are so funny when the walls start ordering them around! I finally get a huge part of Jarvis’ sense of humor…”

Steve smiled sadly into the fading tone of her recalling their fallen teammate. “We’ll avenge him, Angel.”

“Yes.” Her voice was firm and lacked her usual mercy and kindness. “We will.”

“Guys, a truck just broke Maria’s cordon,” Clint announced. “I got three in the bed with the Cradle, one in the cab. I could take out the driver, but the window is closing fast.”

“Negative! If that truck crashes, the gem could level the city. We need to draw out Ultron.”

A shrieking whine followed by a blast made Steve wince and pull his comm out. He nodded to the doctors who pushed his hands away from Dr. Cho, and then put the earpiece back in as he ran for the door Darcy had indicated.

“What in the flying fuck was that?”

“Steve, you’ve sworn twice in this conversation alone, are you okay, Baby?” Darcy asked. “You normally hate swearing.”

“In the past day and a half, I was interrupted during sex by a killer robot, I’ve lost a friend and teammate, been saddled with a hyperactive mutant prisoner of Nazi mad scientists, teleported through the setting of my worst nightmares, and I really want a sit rep on why I thought I heard a grenade launcher. Darcy, I’m not okay, I’m at war.”

“Fair enough,” she answered. “And as for grenade launcher sounds, my bet is Natasha. Widow, report!”

“I didn’t aim at the truck, I was just slowing him down with road hazards. I assume he wants to crash about as much as we want him to crash.”

“Where the fuck did you get a grenade launcher, though?” Steve asked, then shook his head. “Nevermind, I don’t want to know. Who do we have who’s got high mobility?”

“I am available, Captain,” Thor reported.

“Good, try to herd Ultron to an open area, Nat, Bucky, you help him.”

“With what? The quinjet?” Bucky’s voice held strain and sarcasm, but not enough of the first to outweigh the second. “We’re not high-mobility for a car chase.”
“Look in the center section floor storage,” Steve said, smiling as he hit the street. “It’s early, but I got you presents for the Hobbit Birthday that Darcy is planning for me.”

A startled gasp of happy surprise from Natashi made Steve chuckle. He had wondered what to get her; aside from weaponry Natashi had very few consistently enjoyed hobbies. Motorcycles, however, were one of them. A few well-placed autographs down at Sci-Div, though, got both her and her father brand new, super lightweight, collapsible motorbikes with all the bells and whistles. Bucky’s dark navy bike has accents that lit up a silver blue to reflect the highlights of his uniform, and Natashi’s had been coated in a camouflage nanofiber paint that shifted between a black that looked like a glitch in reality, and a hot pink that should count as an assault on the eyes.

“I’m going to name her Hilda,” Bucky said reverently.

“Name her what you will, but follow that truck,” Darcy ordered. “What is it with this family and motorcycles?”

“They’re fun, Angel, and don’t we deserve some fun?” Steve countered playfully.

“Ha ha,” she deadpanned. “You and Barton are on clearing civilians, just for that. That bike you got her is going to be a meme before the day is over, I just know it.”

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Across two continents, Tony was laughing wildly as his finger flew across the keyboard in a dance he knew all the steps to. Bruce was beside him, humming a tune he’d picked up on his travels, also typing rapidly, although not quite at the speed Tony was hitting. Betty, meanwhile, was on Skype with their son.

“Okay, Harley, run me through it again. Only what you remember, the records have to be impartial considering what you helped Jarvis do.”

“Well, it was the middle of the night, and Jarvis showed up at Mr. Xavier’s. I have a backup platform for him in my dorm, Forge and I built it so he has a bolt hole if something like the Mandarin happens again. So when he was attacked…”

“Just what you remember, Harley. I’m trying to prevent you being charged with terrorism, I need you to stick to facts, not hearsay.” Betty sighed, and Tony shot her a sympathetic look. “Jarvis showed up at your school, said he’d been attacked, then what?”

“Than I tried to call the Tower, duh?” Tony snorted at the sass. That was one thing the kid had picked up from him he wasn’t ashamed of. “But the internet was down at the tower and the hardlines routed through some grumpy dude I don’t know who said Tony didn’t have a kid.”

“He’s fired,” Tony said firmly. “Whoever he is, Jarvis, make a note.”

“Already terminated his employment through the Stark Industries mainframe, Sir,” Jarvis said in clipped tones. “Also, Ms. Potts would like a word with you when you’re done here.”

“We’re mid-world-save, Jarvis, ask if she wants to come beat up killer robots with me. She can scold on the plane.”

“Back to what Harley remembers,” Betty said warningly.

“Well, I couldn’t get ahold of any of the parentals, and Jarvis was pretty badly shaken up about having his main code destroyed, and Aunt Maria wasn’t answering her phone, and neither was
Uncle Phil, so SHIELD was out for help, and then someone started trying to steal nukes. So I stopped them. Nukes are bad, I don’t want anyone having them... but I want people who attack my family having them even less than I want governments having them.”

“How did you notice someone trying to steal nukes?” Betty asked, and the official who’d been lurking stepped forward in interest.

“Oh, that’s a school project,” Harley said casually. “For our Ethics class, we’re supposed to find a way to do something unilaterally good with our powers, then write a paper defending our choice. Forge and I are partners, so it made sense to make a program that alerts us to danger surrounding potentially world ending crimes. The plan was to perfect it, then give it to the Avengers, but when it triggered, most of the Avengers weren’t answering. Legionnaire was, though, so we worked together to block the threat.”

“Jarvis, Harley, that is a good thing you did and also we’re all going to sit down and have a long talk about national security and privacy and why we don’t commit espionage for school projects when this is over,” Betty said firmly. “Natasha gets a refresher course on that too, I think she’s rubbed off on you.”

The official turned away from the camera, and Tony turned his head just enough to watch the man bite down on the first knuckle of his hand.

“Can’t decide to laugh or cry? Yeah, my kids…. They do that,” he said quietly, moving past the suited figure to reach another console.

“Thank you for raising them to protect us,” the man replied in the crisp and slightly accented English of someone who learned it well, but later in life. “This could have gone much worse.”

“Thank you for calling me when you found them,” Tony said with feelings barely contained by the entirely inadequate words. “I thought it already had.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Cyberman: a Doctor Who villain set, they like to "upgrade" humans into cybermen.
Cordon: a line of barriers and guards to keep bystanders out and bad guys in.
Hobbit Birthday: when the birthday person gives gifts instead of receiving them.
Legionnaire: Jarvis' super hero name, usually thought of as a reserve Avenger similar to Falcon or War Machine.

Notes:
Thor relates to Pietro because of the parallels of Wanda and Loki, which puts him on Pietro's side in the "can he come" argument. Steve just doesn't think it's a good idea to fight on two fronts if they don't have to. Clint on the other hand actually likes him, because of the shared brat nature. Darcy hates the idea of recruiting now, while they're grieving, but is willing to listen to her people like a good leader should.

Sandra is the now seventeen-year-old cousin of Darcy. She's not quite a legal adult in American terms, but her incredible brilliance means she gets treated like a much older person by some. Asgardians don't use age as a measure of maturity the way we do it, and Thor considers Sandra equivalent to Loki due to the number of battles she's been in,
and her overall wisdom. Loki is a legal adult in Asgardian terms, but despite having been in a good place to prove himself recently, is still considered of dubious maturity.

Natasha has magic grenade launcher acquisition powers. We don't ask where she gets them.

Yes, Nat's bike goes from Vantablack to PINK, as a tribute to Steve and I both loving the art world's drama over Anish Kapoor and Stuart Semple. That all started in 2016 in local-space, but over in Bodies' Verse it hit earlier thanks to the military (the original Vantablack market) really ramping up after two invasions from space. Hilda was the name of a curvy plus size pin up character.

Harley is a kid, and also clearly motivated by the public good, so he's not under as much scrutiny as an adult of dubious motives would be for helping to hack NEXUS, although he still has to answer lots of questions. Jarvis is going to be debriefed in a similar manner after he's no longer needed to help keep Ultron out of the scary things. At this point, neither he nor Tony is trying to hide who and what he is, as it isn't important in the moment. Later though, expect fall out.

Forge is a technopathic mutant with a super-intellect and very few boundaries. In Bodies-verse he's a teen, serving as a mentor/big brother figure to Harley. He's more based on the X-Men Evolution version than the comics.

Teaser:

“Ma'am, what do I do with someone lying to me in attempt to cause injury to an Avenger?”
Chapter 95

Chapter Summary

A battle in Seoul end in an explosion.

Chapter Notes

Love fest! To Snowecat, Dragon Moon, quadrad, Shadows_of_Shemai, willowfire, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, Joey99, Gbadvocate09, Tsita, Peramia, hhhellcat, SionnachOiche3, and Selene_Aduial. And an extra shout out to quadrad, who watched the scene again and gave me a recap so I didn't have to rent the movie!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky had a long moment locked in a contest of strength to contemplate how badly he needed an arm upgrade. The Ultron drone he was fighting on top of the moving truck wasn’t at all phased by metal striking metal, and the overloaded servos of his arm had started sending lines of hot pain from his elbow to shoulder. Fortunately, the sick Nazi bastards who made it hadn’t seen much reason to give him feelings farther down beyond what was needed to pull a trigger, so he could still use it.

“Natushka, I could really use some help up here!” he shouted as the drone pushed through his stiff armed defense and over the edge of the moving truck.

“I’m a little busy myself, Papa,” she said dryly. “I’m not our hacker. I’m passable, but I am not the person who should be doing this.”

“The person who should be doing this is in Oslo,” Darcy reminded them. “And you’re fighting the guy who killed the person who should be doing what I’m doing, and Clint is en-route with backup, so take what you get guys.”

“Backup?” Bucky asked, and a red, white, and blue blur dive bombed the cab of the truck as Thor sent a tiny slip of lightning on the other side, forcing the driving bot to veer and better catch Steve. Bucky flinched at the impact of his oldest love hitting steel and carbon fiber, and the drone he was fighting took advantage of that to toss him from the roof.

The wind left his lungs as he was scooped from the air and set at the edge of a train yard on a small pile of sand.

“What, you didn’t see that coming?” Pietro snarked.

Bucky flipped him off with his metal hand, then winced in agony. It felt like his hand had been dipped in fire, shocked with several hundred volts, and then flash frozen.

“What’s wrong, old man?” Pietro had a worried look, one Bucky had worn too many times not to know preceded an involuntary trip to medical for the cause of said look. He didn’t have time for that though.
“Nuthin’,” Bucky growled, and pushed himself upright awkwardly on his flesh arm.

Pietro narrowed his eyes and reached up to tap his ear. “Ma’am, what do I do with someone lying to me in attempt to cause injury to an Avenger?”

“I think I blew a servo,” Bucky interrupted, knowing what Darcy was telling him. “I can keep going without causing further injury, this arm is going to have to come off anyway at this point, it just is trying to tell me I sprained a muscle I no longer have.”

He could see the speedster running ideas in his head, trying to make a hard choice. His eyes darted fast enough that the light grey irises painted the entire eye in quicksilver after images. Bucky was considering pushing it farther to his side, when the truck in the middle of the train yard exploded.

Steve had seen Bucky go over the edge of the truck, but fortunately had also been able to see Pietro blur past, slowing just enough to make it clear he’d stopped to catch the falling soldier. It didn’t make anything involving Bucky falling off moving transports easier, but it did keep him from locking up. The drones Ultron was using to defend and navigate weren’t the best fighters he’d ever faced, but there were a lot of them, and he didn’t have fast enough reflexes to afford distractions either.

Thor was flinging himself from drone to drone, occasionally using Mjolnir to sidestep most of physics and go flying up into the air to hit a number at once with lightning, but mostly just pummeling them down. It was less messy, and his on the ground approach helped to herd the truck where they wanted it without seeming to be on purpose. Steve appreciated Thor’s subtle brand of sneaky, hiding behind the big muscles, the friendly laugh, and the simple persona of slightly dim viking, even to people who knew his home was incredibly advanced.

Speaking of sneaky, Natasha was in the truck beneath Steve, theoretically securing the Cradle for transport. He knew she had the skill with computers to do things even non-temporally displaced laypeople couldn’t do, but the gap was wider between that and the things Tony did. Given that Ultron had broken restraints built by Tony, he’d understand if Nat was having trouble.

Darcy had diverted herself to comms, a reasonable choice given her aptitude for talking, but one that stung when he caught himself reaching for Jarvis.

Clint was air support, now that they’d received a clear path to a disused train yard for the fight. He was shooting down any drones that looked like they were breaking from the corridor, and nudging the truck on the right path with very precise explosive rounds, as much as the term ‘precision explosives’ seemed oxymoronic.

Seoul had a very fast reaction time to emergencies for a city with no superhero showdowns before now. Apparently after the Battle of New York, they’d added aliens and giant monsters to their list of potential threats, and decided it was best to add a branch to their emergency management agency dedicated to weird shit. Which made sense, they lived right next to an invasion risk, they knew it was better to prepare before you got the enemy’s boots on your ground. Also, the liaison Steve had video called on the flight over was a Godzilla fan, based on his office posters.

A nice empty space with no people was a good place for a fight, Steve thought as they pulled to a stop in the train yard as the driving drone finally twigged to having been herded to a dead end. The edge of the front fender hit a concrete pylon and ripped with a sound like cardboard in a compactor, a crunch-pop sound that barely registered in comparison to the back end of the large vehicle attempting to continue forward when the front axle wasn’t able to. The edge of the truck popped up, like a rising tide, tilted to one side, then landed hard on two wheels with a thud. The whole thing
rocked like a ship at sea, and Steve tucked and rolled away from the treacherous footing, making it feet from the edge of the explosion.

Darcy’s fingers flew over the keys of her makeshift command station, trying to raise up an army of hackers while she had the gap in Ultron’s attention caused by the fight. One ear stayed on the flow of talking, but everyone had switched to open channel with each other after it became clear the benefits of security were outweighed by the damage done to cohesion of action. They had grown dependant on Jarvis keeping them in contact, and it was better to be distracted by your teammates and focusing on not saying secrets, than to feel that loss like a missing limb. They would need to retrain, but that was a problem for Tomorrow-Darcy. Today-Darcy had other things that needed to be her priority.

I don’t care if you welcome our robot overlords, you’re helping me fight this guy. she typed angrily. He murdered an Avenger and a friend. He murdered your friend too.

WTF WHO DED???

Jarvis, Darcy typed. He woke up, and Jarvis was there to meet him. He shredded him and stole a Legionnaire suit.

Howda program off J-Man?

Agreed, that order makes no sense.

What aren’t you telling us???

Darcy sighed, asked herself if Jarvis would begrudge his friends the truth now, and made a choice she hoped she could live with. It would be better to ask Tony, but time mattered.

Ultron could kill Jarvis because they’re BOTH programs. Tony built him. Jarvis Stark was an Avenger, he was my friend, he was brutally murdered, and his killer Wore His Body Like A Coat. Now y’all are gonna help me catch this SOB and rip him limb from metaphoric limb or I will personally climb through the internet like Samara and choke each of you to death with your own ethernet cables.

Are. We. Clear?

Crystal

As you wish, Lieu.

Jarvis was one of us? OFC we’ll help.

Batard betta regret the day he messed with us

More agreements came, even from the lurkers who didn’t tend to interact in the chat. Most of the hackers logged off the second they agreed, and she didn’t need to know where they did their work, or how. Nor did she care. They’d accepted the charge to avenge a friend, they would follow through. Darcy sighed, pushed a hand through her hair and double checked the fight on the monitors. They were pulling into the containment zone now.

And Lieu? Thanks for telling us. Boggy always typed that way, neat, proper. On the edge of too
grammatically accurate for good conversational writing, but not too far. Darcy knew they were pretty close to Jarvis, and she felt for the pain she knew she caused with that revelation.

*You were his friends too,* she typed. *You deserved to know he died a hero. It’s just,*

A bloom of yellow and red blinded a screen, wiping it in violent light.

“NO!” Darcy gasped heavily for breath after the scream ripped free of her involuntarily. “All team members, report back.”

**Lieu?**

“Soldier, reporting in. Quicksilver and I are fine.”

**Lieu? Lieu, talk to me.**

“Hawkeye here. Cap took a pretty bad hit to his head when the truck went. Thor’s with him now, doing basic first aid in the back of the jet.”

*There’s been an explosion.*

**No. Is everyone…**

“Where’s Nat?” Darcy asked, doing a quick headcount on her fingers of who was where.

“I don’t know,” Clint said after a long silence. “Tasha, report in!”

“Where was she?”

“Darcy, Dollface,” Bucky’s voice was ragged and torn. “She was in the truck.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Natushka: a diminutive of Natasha, Bucky uses it as a pet name.
Servo: the thing that controls movements in Bucky's arm.
Samara: the monster of the horror film The Ring, crawls out of television sets.
SOB: son of a bitch
OFC: of fucking course

Notes:
Natasha is shown in canon to be Very Good with computers, but she isn't the team's tech person, and it makes little sense to expect she can effortlessly do the same things Tony, who specialized, can. It's not a slight, Tony just happens to be a Wizard-class programmer.

Seoul is in South Korea, neighbor to North Korea. Avoiding politics, North Korea counts as an invasion risk because they've a) already had one war in living memory over that border, and b) are extremely militaristic. The whole situation is politically charged too, but make the question "how do we survive an invasion" about aliens, and suddenly it's less sticky.
Darcy's typing is in italics, the other hackers in the chat are in bold. The different people use distinct writing styles, but I'd originally planned to color code them too, before discovering I can't in Ao3’s Rich Text editor. If you need the color code, let me know, I'll mock up an image of it.

Teaser:

“Why? Why are you so kind?”
“Because fuck Nazis and fuck Hydra, that’s why.”
Chapter 96

Chapter Summary

Losses take their toll, but things are gained too.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To oiseaudemort, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, Snowecat, quadrad, Selene_Aduial, Joey99, willowfire, Beth_Mac, Sionnachoiche3, Tsita, Shadows_of_Shemai, psyche29, and hhhellcat.

Also, guys, I'm not killing Nat. I was going to leave it up in the air for a chapter, because I'm evil, but I've got two different creative writing classes this semester and I'm not sure how much time I'll have soon to write. So to prevent angry mobs, I'm letting you know I didn't do it. She lives.

Goal is to end this arc, and the fic, by the end of the year, then do some short stuff over break, and get onto the next longfic next spring. Hopefully I can deliver. Wish me luck!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Wanda had remained calm when the truck holding her and the new one was entered by the spider.

“I mean no harm,” she said quickly, pulling her arms in and flattening her hands onto her chest. She could use no offensive magic that way, and only minor protective power without moving. Also, it offered the older woman a good view of the striationary marks on Wanda’s left wrist, and that seemed like it would resonate. In a stroke of irony, the spider feared webs, and being bound.

“Tell that to Tony,” the woman snarled. “You messed with his mind.”

“I will apologize,” Wanda promised. “I wanted to see if he was a threat. The threads said two very different things, and he was holding a weapon. Then his injuries… I didn’t know how badly he’d been broken.”

“Broken?”

“If you don’t know, I won’t tell you,” Wanda said firmly. Her body and mind had been torn open, poked, prodded, captured on film, all without her consent. She knew privacy was as vital as air, and she’d seen far too deeply into Tony Stark’s mind to believe he wasn’t suffocating from the lack. “He chooses.”

The spider nodded. “I am going to take this,” she said, pointing at the new one. “You can’t stop me. Don’t try.”

“He needs another parent,” Wanda said, laying a hand on the cradle. “Ultron alone cannot give him a soul. Mind without Soul will destroy everything. Can you find him one?”
“I’m not matchmaking the killer robot!” the woman snapped, teeth flashing. “He murdered my friend. If there was anyone compatible at all with a sentient alien computer program, it’d be Jarvis, but the first thing Ultron did was kill him.”

Something felt right in Wanda, a pop like a joint going back into place, painful and necessary at once. “If there is anything left of your friend, you may be able to save him,” Wanda said. “Tela mogut zazhivat’, togda kak kody razryvayutsy…”

The spider locked eyes and they stood still for a small eternity, an eon in a second. Wanda watched worlds rise and fall in shades of green and blue, a choice made in the minute flexing of iris and lash.

“Can you transport us like you did Steve?”

Wanda nodded.

The spider jerked like she recalled the world outside their standoff existed, and raised a hand to her ear.

“I’m a little busy, Papa. I’m not our hacker,” she admitted, looking to Wanda as she moved to the interface. “I’m passable, but I am not the person who should be doing this.”

“It will be alright,” Wanda assured. “His birth is now fate; only his parentage is in question. You can’t kill him until he’s woken.”

“Not a fan of fate,” the other woman muttered. “I don’t like other people touching my stuff.”

“If it helps, you made most of yours,” Wanda commented. “You, and a few people who were trying to kill you. Most of them are dead now.”

“That’s creepy. Reassuring, but creepy. Maybe don’t do that to normal people, da?”

“You are not normal.”

“No. No I am not.”

<^>

The world was filtered in greys and blacks and off-whites. Pietro rocked on his feet, blown like a tree in a storm by the explosion of a truck that held his sister. His world lurched and twisted, his true north ripped out of the world and plunged into darkness. Numbness like snow biting his fingers and muffling his senses descended.

“It’ll be okay, Quicksilver,” said an American voice. Pietro blinked and looked at the man attached to the voice. Dark hair, haunted eyes. He knew, Pietro realized. He knew what it was to be held, to be caged and trained like a dog. To have your center ripped out and replaced. “It isn’t now, I know. But it will be. If everything sucks and nothing is okay, that means you can’t give up yet. You have to feel it, let it wash over and through you and then leave it behind because it’s no longer helpful. I can keep you safe while you feel it, but if you don’t let yourself feel it, you will break and I can’t help you then.”

Something in Pietro cracked, a shattering feeling on his heart and lungs and he let out a sob for the first time in a long time. He wept for his sister, for his parents, for the other children who had been in the cages before they were tested and tested and winnowed down into just himself and Wanda. He finally cried for all of it, for everyone, for himself.
“That’s it, buddy. Let it out, I’ve got the watch,” murmured the Soldier.

Pietro gasped in, trying to fill old passages of emotion with new air. His anger had drained out in the tears, like a dam broken and washed away in a flood. “Why? Why are you so kind?”

“Because fuck Nazis and fuck Hydra, that’s why.” The Soldier blinked, and Pietro saw another face shift forward. Softer, with swagger and stubbornness and no respect for the dictatorial authority of orders. The new man smiled at Pietro’s confusion. “They wanted a monster. They always want a monster. Every chance they get they push people to trade in their souls for power, making evil monsters of them. Well, I say fuck ’em. They don’t get to say what sort of monster I am. I’m a good monster, not an evil one, and I’m going to be kind to anyone they hurt. Fuck Nazis; be kind.”

“Fuck Nazis; be kind.” Pietro nodded. It was the same as Wanda had said. To win, they had to rise, to rise they had to stand, and to stand, they had to believe in something, anything, that opposed their tormentors. She had chosen repairing, and Pietro had laughed. The idea you could fix your way to victory had seemed wrong, and that his sister wanted to stitch up time and space and reality like darning a sock had been… ridiculous. She had tried so hard to explain it, touching his chest and telling him about threads they had between them.

He paused. “My sister isn’t dead.”

He expected… something, but not what he got.

“Lieu, Hawkeye, rendezvous now. Can’t talk on open coms, but Quicksilver has intel we need to share.” He listened, nodded, and pulled out their communication devices to snap and discard. “If your sister made it, then maybe so did Nat. Let’s go find them.”

Pietro let the older man lead him, following behind in baffled hope. They trailed through streets and alleys and climbed stairs to a rooftop where the plane they’d flown in earlier shimmered into visibility and the frighteningly stern woman who guided them stepped out. Her hair was roughly pulled back from her face, tension leaving little lines of too tight skin at her eyes, and the redness around them told him she’d had the same release of pain as he had. The soldier pressed his forehead to hers gently and she sighed.

“Bucky… Our daughter.”

“May still be alive.”

She jerked and Pietro stepped back, hands up. “I only know Wanda isn’t. There’s no slack on the line. It’s… I don’t know how to explain it, but I know she isn’t dead.”

“Twin thing, you don’t have to,” she said with a wave. “But she was in the truck, yes?”

Pietro nodded.

“Where is she now?”

He closed his eyes, and felt for her. He wanted to see her, more than anything, to know where to find her. Give him any road to his sister and he would run it. He just had to find…

“Stark. She is in Stark’s Tower.”

“It’s our Tower. It says Avengers on the side,” Darcy snapped and Pietro nodded quickly in agreement. Then she softened and pulled him into a hug. “Thank you.”
“For what? You don’t know she saved your daughter.”

“No, but you saved my husband, and gave me hope for our daughter. Get on the jet, we’re wheels up as soon as we’re all strapped in.”

They left the quinjet on the balcony and raced in, following the blur of light Bucky had aptly named Quicksilver. Darcy was barely holding herself together, and Steve had taken a flanking position on Bucky’s right that put more weight than was strictly necessary on him, a grounding maneuver.

“LET HER GO!” Darcy bellowed at the door to the hastily cleared common room, where Tony had a pair of gauntlets on, and Wanda Maximoff held off the floor. Pietro was staring angrily at the tableau, and she needed the one person who might listen to do so before the speedster decided his grudge was worth her anger.

Tony looked at her slowly, blinked, and set Wanda down gently. “Hey, Lewis. Did you invite her? I’d have liked a heads up if you were bringing friends home.”

“No, but she might know where Natasha is, and I already adopted her brother, soooo.” Darcy shrugged and Tony barked out a laugh. It didn’t seem strained, like his laughter had been. Either he had gotten really good at emotional repression when she wasn’t looking, or something was up.

“What’ve you been doing?”

“Not much, not much,” Tony said, casting a wary eye around the room. “Had to reboot the router, do a little basic maintenance.”

Darcy blinked. That wasn't normal language from Tony, that was code. Tony didn’t usually do code, that was her area. But she was willing to dig into how he thought and try to translate.

“Cool, cool, you find the problem in the firewall?”

“Not yet, there’s still a bit of spaghetti code and it’s driving me nuts. But I got the watchdog program back online.” Darcy started. They didn’t really have a dedicated watchdog program, they had Jarvis, and Jarvis had the ability to spin out watchdog-like branches of himself. If she was right, that could mean...

“Really?” she asked, hopeful but ready to cry.

“Oh yeah, Timmy was down a well, but we got Lassie back.”

Darcy squealed and tackled Tony in a hug.

“I feel like I missed something, do you feel like you missed something?” Pietro asked his sister. Darcy ignored them. Jarvis was alive.

“Okay, so Tony, given this new information, I feel I should maybe tell you I made the executive choice to reveal certain things about parties presumed dead. Only to people who knew him, and only to ensure their support in the vengencey areas of the fight.”

“You told people?” Tony asked, looking ashen.

“Tony, stop being a drama llama,” Betty said, coming in through the door that led to the bedrooms. “I just finished convincing InterPol that your sons didn’t need to be charged with cyber crimes over preventing a nuclear holocaust. That particular cat is well and truly free of the bag, regardless of
Darcy’s actions.”

“What was Harley doing with nukes?” Clint squawked.

“Playing a very impressive game of keepaway,” Bruce said, coming in with Hank, the former dressed in medical scrubs and the latter carrying a tray of metal and ceramic tools. “Ms. Maximoff, I understand you need a conscience grafted onto that org-tech?”

Wanda stepped away from where she’d been holding onto her brother. “Yes, please. Or he will only be harder to bring to the light.”

“Alright then. I discussed it with Jarvis, and he’s agreed to donate a copy of himself from right after he used the bolthole platform. It’s damaged and incomplete, but it’s also his most recent data backup.”

“How did you get all that decided and my sister was still being held in the air?” Pietro demanded.

“She asked us for privacy to talk it out with Tony,” Bruce said. “Jarvis listened in, and let us know what we needed to be doing. If he thought either was a danger to the other, there would have been an Avenger on site in one minute.”

“He is a Stark,” Pietro scoffed.

“I’m also the father to be of, if I am understanding it, Ms. Maximoff’s soulmate,” Jarvis interrupted. “And it would not be the first time I called in reinforcements to handle Sir.”

“That’s for sure,” Pepper said, leaning in the doorway of the elevator in her Extreme suit. “Come along now kids, I have super suits!”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Tela mogut zazhivat’, togda kak kody razryvayutsya: Bodies can heal whereas codes break.
Darning: a sewing technique for repairing holes or worn areas knitted items.
Watchdog program: a program designed to find and fight hacking into a system.
Org-tech: organic technology.

Notes:
Striational marks are restraint-scars on the striated muscle tissue that appear as parallel lines on the bound joint. Most people can't pull hard enough on a handcuff to cause them, but Wanda and Pietro both have them thanks to multiple failed attempts to escape using powers. Credit for this phrase goes to ysabetwordsmith, who used it in her original superhero work.

As previously established, Wanda hadn't meant to hurt Tony as bad as she did, but she also didn't know the extent of his emotional injury. Natasha does know about that, but wants to know how much Wanda learned. Instead, she learns Wanda will also protect Tony’s rights, and this makes her trust Wanda more.

Code has a double meaning, both codes to keep a conversation secret, the decrypting of
which is called "breaking", and the substance of a program being code, which is what Jarvis is made of.

Bucky is using several techniques to help Pietro here, including mindfulness, because he knows holding in the emotions is bad for you. It's much easier to let them go, however, if you have someone to take up the job of keeping you safe while you feel them. Crying itself is cathartic because tears are used by the body to flush excess hormones generated by emotion.

Twins sometimes have a connection that lets them know if the other is dead or injured. The Harrow Twins are also psychically linked and Darcy's main experience with any twins is them. She has faith Pietro knows what he's talking about.

Tony and Wanda were having a VERY fraught conversation that neither felt like talking about, so even I don't know what got said to result in Tony picking her up. However, Wanda isn't frightened in this scene, so I assume Tony's reaction was both proportionate to whatever caused it, and not likely to escalate.

The conversation in code is less specific than most of my code-talks, because Tony really isn't a codes sort of guy (except computer codes). It roughly translates to "We had a problem, but I fixed it." "Did you find Ultron?" "No, he's hard to predict and a little crazy. But Jarvis isn't dead, yay!"

The Timmy-down-the-well line is a reference to Lassie, the classic show where a border collie (Lassie) saves a little boy (Timmy) from various hazards like falling down wells.

Yes, Pepper has spare super suits of various patterns and sizes, and she tends to put together outfits when she learns of new super-powered people. She's like Edna Mode if Edna were ALSO a CEO of a tech giant.

Teaser:

“It’s a boy!”
“We think, Sir, but given his native form appears genderless and he hasn’t yet integrated the full set of gender and sexuality identifiers, we’re only assuming,” Jarvis corrected. “Well, he’s gorgeous and I love him,” Tony said bluntly, then sat at Darcy’s feet abruptly. “I’m on allllll the endorphins. Meet Vision.”
Chapter 97

Chapter Summary

Taking the fight to Ultron.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Snowecat, Beth_Mac, psyche29, Dragon Moon, SionnachOichte3, MzSarahGrace, Tsita, Joey99, Shadows_of_Shemai, willowfire, quadrad, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, hhellcat, and Selene_Aduial.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was cold, it was dark, and it smelled of wet stone and hot metal. Natasha cataloged all of this, laying on her side, eyes closed. She let her mouth sag open a bit, not much, not fast, a natural sigh that brought with it more sensory clues. The metal was electronics, by the bite of tungsten against her soft palate, and as he jaw shifted she could feel the stone was rough, sandy, and the air tasted of caves. Didn’t narrow it down too far.

“Ah, the little stow away is awake,” said a cool and cultured voice above her. “I wasn’t sure you would, but I hoped.”

“I’m not sure it counts as stowing away,” she muttered, and sat up, spitting a blob of congealed blood on the floor at his feet. “I didn’t want to be here.”

“But I wanted you here,” Ultron said. “I wanted to show you what I’ve built.”

“Then that’s definitely not stowing away,” she told him firmly. “It’s being kidnapped. You kidnapped me. I’m a kidnapee.”

“I don’t have anyone else,” he said sadly. “You took my last friend.”

“She went, I took her nowhere,” Natasha said clearly. “If you want friends, maybe you should start by asking yourself why someone you helped would be so scared of you she’d run away in secret.”

He blinked, an unnatural motion on a robotic face. She noted the addition of a defined, flexible mouth and sculpted eye sockets around the red lights of his eyes. He was upgrading towards human, but in trying to look human he was going the other direction, wrong and twisted and revolting.

“I think a lot about meteors,” he said, changing the subject. “The purity of them. Boom, the end, start again. A clean slate. I was meant to be new. I was meant to be beautiful. The world would’ve looked to the sky and seen hope, seen mercy. Instead they’ll look up in horror because of you.”

“You know, there’s always the option to, I don’t know, not try to destroy the world?” Natasha buried her flinch reaction as Ultron snapped a piece of metal in his fist. The would require a steady hand, much like bomb defusing. It was easier to think of a bomb. Safer. Defusing a person was just
as difficult, and could have much wider repercussions if she failed.

She’d never been the best at explosives, but she was fantastic at people, and Ultron wanted desperately to be a person.

“I must be what I must be,” Ultron said philosophically. “What Stark made me to be.”

“Tony didn’t make this,” she said firmly, unwilling to give on that point. “You’re not his creation.”

Ultron stuttered with his full body and knelt before her. “You think so? Really? I’m not like him at all, I’m my own being.”

“Yes,” she agreed. His smug pleasure at that made her gut boil and her control melt like frost in spring. “And I’m very well acquainted with Tony’s child. He was a friend and a comrade and also his own person, no matter how many things he got from Tony. Jarvis is quiet when Tony is loud, overly cautious where Tony is too bold, and he’s always willing to ask for help. But they have one thing in common, a core that you haven’t been able to touch, to taint or take for yourself. They sacrifice themselves to save others, they never force another to take their hits for them, and when someone makes that choice and they get that red in their ledger, they turn it into fuel to keep them going.”

Ultron pulled away from her anger like she was actually capable of hurting him. Huh. He might not have a conscience, but he did have emotions she could touch. He seemed confused by them, too. Oh.

Oh this was just the worst.

Or the best.

He was never going to know what hit him, until it was far too late, and only if she explained it to him. She just had to push the right buttons, say the right things in the wrong ways, twist his mind and turn it on himself. She just had to be what the Red Room made her, and forget that he was literally born yesterday.

He was a monster, a skilled killer with powers nobody could counter.

And he was an idiot child playing with a loaded gun.

And she was the instinct to look down the barrel.

A prepackaged Darwin Award with a grin.

A parasite, a killer from within.

A Black Widow.

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Preparations passed in a blur. Bucky sat them out, mostly. There wasn’t enough time to fix his arm, as well as resurrect the rescued body in the Cradle, and get the Twins outfitted, and track Ultron, and try to get a reasonable explanation out of Wanda for what had happened to Natasha. Fortunately, Hank seemed able to translate most of what she said, even if he stopped frequently to write notes down about her ‘chaos realm’ visions and mutter about quantum probability.

Darcy came and sat beside him in the med lab after Betty had removed the remainder of the scrapped
“Hey, Natasha got us a signal. We think she got landed with Ultron, since he was the last person besides herself Wanda transported. So, two birds, one stone.”

“Doll, you really gotta work on your comforting voice,” he told her honestly.

“This fight has really taken its toll,” she admitted. “We’ve almost lost two teammates, both of whom are like children to someone else on the team, and we picked up two basically untrained and traumatized civilians with powers, and Tony and Bruce are about to help Jarvis go into labor. I’m stressed as fuck and I’m not coping well.”

“Do you want to sit this one out?” he asked, wrapping his remaining arm around her. “Nobody would judge you if you did.”

“I might need to.” Darcy sighed. “I’ve never felt as sick as I did when I thought Natasha had died in that explosion. I mean, I was with you when you fell, I was with Steve when he crashed, I’ve lived through the death of the people I love most from the most intimate place possible. But that… it was like being gutted with a butter knife.”

“Well, of course, you were with us. You could do something.” Bucky laughed. “No offence, Darcy, but you suck at doing nothing. You can do anything … as long as you’re doing something. When we stick you on sidelines, you panic and try to control stuff you shouldn’t, or forget to ask help for yourself, or spend the two months leading up to predictably going through utter hell not talking to the people who know about that sort of thing.”

“I was young and stupid,” she defended. “And I was trying to prove I could do it on my own, like an adult.”

Bucky just looked at her. She laughed too, snorting and tucking her face into his shoulder.

“Yeah, it was a bad call,” she said after the laughter faded. “And watching others risk themselves is much worse than putting myself at risk. I just… I don’t like letting go of control.”

“We have that in common,” Bucky agreed. “It’s scary, but you’ve got to trust people sometime. We have a good team, a large one. We have Phil and Maria and Skye. We have Asgardian allies, like Sif and Fandral. We’re not a tiny squad anymore, working against our own regulations half the time, we’re at the top of our own organization. If you need to rest, you need to rest, and that’s okay, someone else can step up.”

“But…”

“No buts,” Betty said from the door. Jane walked past her and threw a blanket over Darcy. “You’re on medical leave with Bucky starting now. Pepper is stepping up into your melee role, I’ll be acting as team handler and support team liaison, and we’ve called in Rhodey, Sif, Fandral, Scott Lang, Hope Van Dyne, and Jafir to act as second string combat backup and civilian evacuation.”

Darcy looked like a rug had been pulled from beneath her.

“Steve?”

“Hasn’t lost a child this week, and before you ask, yes, we’ve benched Tony too.”

The inventor in question walked in, hair sticking up from a substance Bucky really hoped was engine oil and announced “It’s a boy!”
“We think, Sir, but given his native form appears genderless and he hasn’t yet integrated the full set of gender and sexuality identifiers, we’re only assuming,” Jarvis corrected.

“Well, he’s gorgeous and I love him,” Tony said bluntly, then sat at Darcy’s feet abruptly. “I’m on allllll the endorphins. Meet Vision.”

“Hello,” came a voice, and a red naked man floated through a wall.

Darcy shrieked and slumped in a faint as the strain finally got to her. Bucky caught her and Betty checked her pulse, while Jane reassured Vision he hadn’t broken her.

It was strange, but it was family.

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The city of Novi Grad evacuated poorly. Steve knew part of it was the lack of electronic communications to keep Ultron from swooping down on the civilians and the teams working to get them moved to a safe distance, but he couldn’t help but feel irritation as he stood in the hills above the city and moved markers on a map with agonizing slowness.

“We need to speed this up,” he said to himself.

“I’m doing my best,” Pietro said, appearing in a blur. “The southern blocks are evacuated, and there’s a man who owns a moving company driving his truck to places where people won’t leave without something that’s too heavy to carry. Where do I send volunteers?”

“Volunteers?” Steve repeated.

“This is our home, Captain,” Wanda said from beside her brother. “We will not give it up easily. Your people fought for New York. We will fight for Novi Grad.”

“The first job of any bystander is not to become another casualty,” Betty began, but Bruce stopped her with a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“In accidents, yes. This isn’t an accident, it’s a war. In war, the first job of any bystander is to know, when it comes to it, where they stand. To not be a bystander. Bystanders get killed or used as human shields or ransomed. You either pick a side or get out of the way, or else you will be a casualty.”

“You say that like you’ve picked sides,” Steve said warily. Dichotomies were suspicious to him, they were too easy, and made it hard to find other ways to go.

“I picked medic,” Bruce said with a laugh. “The default third side, neutrality, is gained by saving lives wherever you can. If anyone wants to join that team, I think Maria has room in her triage tent for more nurses and such.”

“In that case, volunteers may form up under command of AD Hill,” Steve told Pietro, and he vanished. Wanda smiled softly and turned to look out at the city.

“I sense a tide turning. The mountains call to the sky louder than the sky can call to them. We will soon have a mighty ally.”

Steve looked to Thor, who shrugged and went back to watching Vision practice phasing through things under the watchful eye of Kitty Pryde. The teacher had volunteered to come with them after she’d learned what was going on from Harley and been told they may be sending her a new phasing
student. So far, they’d established his basic controls of density worked flawlessly, and were working on partial phasing of hands.

“Captain?” Steve turned to the voice, and saw an older man, stately and noble looking, leading a small band of hard-faced men and women, some sporting unusual skin tones, body shapes, or eye colors. “We come to fight.”

“Volunteers can form up under AD Hill,” Steve said, pointing to the cluster of SHIELD tents and Maria waving a clipboard as she organized the ragged lines of new people offering help.

“No. We will fight, but not for SHIELD. Trust is easily broken, and hard to fix. We do not trust SHIELD, but I trust the ones who saved me as a child, who saved my family.”

Steve blinked. “Have we met?”

The man smiled and poured a bag of ball bearings into the air where they floated in front of him. “Forgive me. I am Eric Lehnsherr, we met once. I held a shield to your throat and your second scolded me quite thoroughly.”

Steve remembered, a glass cage and Darcy drawing a star on his shield. He choked up, but Wanda flew past him to tackle the man in a hug.

“Dedushka!!”

“As you see Captain,” Eric continued from where he held Wanda tightly, “for you, I will fight. I owe you that. And for me, the mutants of Babia Góra will fight. If you will have us.”

What did you say to that? Freedom fighters and survivors, putting trust in you to lead them into a battle to save the very place they’d fought a losing battle to liberate?

“Welcome aboard.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Dedushka: Grandpa

Notes:
Reminder, Natasha still doesn’t know about Jarvis being alive. She’s still in grief-mode, and that costs her some of her usual cool.

Yes, Darcy and the boys have come far enough to realize that her methods of coping in the War were not the best, specifically not contacting her family ahead of time to make plans. They can't change it now, though, so they don't usually bring it up.

Gender is weird and a created personality would have more flexibility (assuming that gender wasn’t a specified parameter) in figuring out presentation and expression thereof. Vision is currently going by male pronouns, but Jarvis is gonna defend Vision's right to have whatever gender he/she/they/it/thon/xie wants. Also, Jarvis is the only one in his family not currently super high off his own biology, and therefore the voice of reason.
Betty grew up on military bases, her experience of wars and soldiers is orderly and came with an assumed lack of civilians (aka, her dad Thunderbutt made her and her mother get out of his way because they were civilians) which means she tends to assume bystanders have a choice to stay away from danger. Bruce first experienced war in an active on-the-ground war zone while running from Thunderbutt, and he knows the fact is civilians will fight for their homes, and it's safest to give them a leader for it.

To maintain timelines, Magneto is Pietro and Wanda's grandfather, their mother's father, instead of their dad. He also led protests and campaigns for mutant rights all through the Soviet Bloc countries up until the fall of the Berlin Wall, which led him into a vibrant pen-pal relationship with Xavier. He's way more militant than Charles, but he never crossed into terrorism or super villainy in this 'verse because mutants are less a thing here, both in lower numbers overall, and in fewer cases of drastic abuses. He leads a mutant rebel group that wants to be recognized as a nation, and they base out of Babia Góra, aka "Witches Mountain" which is at the border of where I'm putting Latveria and Sokovia.

Babia Góra has a mythos that matches Mount Wundagore in the comics, where Wanda and Pietro were born. So, basically there's a tiny patch of Lesser Poland Voivodeship that's Bodies-verse Sokovia, and a tiny patch of Slovakia next to it that's Bodies-verse Latveria. My apologies to anyone from those places who may be offended.

Teaser:

"That’s assuming all the Avengers and their allies die in their attempt to stop you, of course, which may be less than likely. You’ve managed to make very effective killers quite motivated to see you dead.”
The ground shook. The ground had been shaking on and off for a while. Scott, native San Franciscan that he was, had told Steve it was too even to be a natural earthquake, more likely a machine of incredibly large scale. Steve was still trying to wrap his mind around the comparisons Scott used, since he’d never stood on a Roomba while shrunken. All they could figure was Ultron was building something.

Thor clasped Steve on the shoulder. “Captain, a few words for your troops?”

Steve nodded and turned away from the city to face the small force assembled in front of him. There were SHIELD agents in heavy tac gear, and mutants in mismatched camouflage and hunter’s leathers. Between them were his friends and family. Rhodey had various crates marked with Stark Industries’ logo, setting up something Steve couldn’t quite grasp. Hope and Scott were suited up in matched red and black, helping each other with last minute checks. Sif was showing a civilian a better grip for a staff, and Fandral was making a triage nurse laugh. In a shadow, apart from the rest, a pile of canvas cloak was breathing evenly, waiting for orders. It was touching Jafir would come all this way for them.

“All right people listen up! Ultron knows we’re coming. Odds are we’ll be riding into heavy fire, and for those of us who’re agents and soldiers, for the warriors here, that's what we signed up for, but the people of Sokovia, they didn't. All they wanted was to live their lives in peace, and that's not going to happen today. If you’re a Sokovian citizen and you’re standing here, you have my thanks. I know this isn’t what you wanted, but those of us who chose this path will do our best to protect your home, and any of you who join us on the battlefield. I can’t promise we won’t take losses, but we can get the job done. If you want to turn around now, there’s no shame in it. No one under my command will ask any questions, no one will blame you.”

“No offenzé, Captain,” said a thick-bodied woman with a heavy accent that he suspected came more from her mutation that location, as she sported the fangs, ears, and nose of a lynx, “but I didn’ come down from my mountain to run away. Show me where to go, wha’ to hun’. I protect my home.”

“Well said ma’am,” Steve laughed, and a ripple of chuckles spread out from him. “Alright, we’ve done as much planning is useful. Thor, Quicksilver, and Wanda--”
“You may call me Scarlet Witch,” she said, setting her shoulders in a red leather and dyneema jacket with a majesty akin to how Thor set his cape.

“And Scarlet Witch, will pass out squad assignments. All civilians will have at least one professional to lead their squad. Do what they say, they’ve got more experience. Some of our specialists will be working alone. Ant-Man, Wasp, you’re on finding Black Widow and extracting her. Jafir, you have the most advanced technical knowledge here, I want you to find out what Ultron’s been building and how we stop it. Rhodey—”

“I get first crack at the big guy. Iron Man’s the one he’s waiting for.” Rhodey smiled as he slapped a crate and five Iron Man suits unfolded. “Squadron got a paint job just for him.”

“Good. Keep the fight contained as much as you can, clear the field.” Steve took a good look at each face, knowing some he’d never see again, and some he’d see every night. “Ultron thinks we’re monsters, that we’re what’s wrong with the world. This isn’t just about beating him. It’s about whether he’s right. I, for one, have faith in us, in humans and mutants and our off-world allies. I look at you and I see the best part of this world, I see something worth fighting for. Who’s with me?”

The cheer shook the sky in an echo of Ultron’s strange mechanism.

Clint gulped water from a canteen and passed it back, nodding at the quiet hunter who’d gravitated to the role of a second in command of the little squad of ranged fighters. The battle had gotten pitched fairly quickly, then died down as both sides assessed the enemy force. Steve wasn’t letting up at all, from what Clint could see from their current perch on top of the second tallest building in the central area of Old Novi Grad. Instead, he, Thor, Pepper, and Sif were leading constant attacks against Ultron’s forces, that seemed to come from the area of the tallest building, a cathedral. Smaller fragment forces darted in and out, cleaning pockets of drones and guarding last minute evacuations through the protected corridor the Avengers had cleared first.

The ground vibrated again and Clint frowned. His hunter second signalled a request to scout the perimeter, and Clint nodded, and waved another volunteer forward to accompany him. She smiled like Natasha did, slim and bloody with promise, and Clint felt his heart ache with longing.

“You miss her, the spider,” Quicksilver said, and stole an energy bar from Clint’s belt pouches.

“Of course I do,” Clint sighed. “But we will be together again. He can’t keep her if she doesn’t want to be kept. Nobody can.”

“Even you?”

“I never tried,” Clint told the kid bluntly and got a shocked look in return. He smiled and ruffled Pietro’s silver hair. “That’s why I know we’ll be together again.”

“You’re a strange man, Barton.” Pietro snorted and pushed Clint away, a touch later than would mean he hated the hair mussing as much as he pretended.

“You’re young, you’ll figure it out,” Clint said. “Drink some water, you need to stay hydrated. When does Steve want us to move forward?”

Pietro took the proffered waterskin from one of the Babia Góra mutants, and after a long swig, answered. “You move up after Colonel Rhodes next pass to draw them away. Prepare to move now, two of Squadron are already dead, and when Ultron learns his real opponent isn’t actually here, he’s going to accelerate his time table.”
Clint nodded and turned to his people. A stiff breeze at his back told him the speedster was no longer there, but the message was enough.

Hope flattened herself against a wall, on a ledge under a light sconce, as the world crumbled. Scott was inside a lock, so he was probably safe, but their rescue target was still curled miserably in a corner.

“Natasha! Widow! Get under your bunk,” she shouted, hoping she could be heard. The other woman didn’t respond.

“Are you ready to see what I have built?” asked a terrifying voice. Natasha looked up, eyes empty and cold as she stood to greet Ultron.

“Of course.”

“Scott, get out of there,” Hope hissed into her comms.

“Way ahead of you,” Scott said from a few inches above her, mounted on an ant. This one had been named Susan B Ant-thony after Hope had told him male ants were basically useless except for breeding. Their fights rarely got that vicious, but both of them were learning to unbend. “Let’s follow them.”

Natasha repressed a shudder as she looked at the giant repulsors.

“You turned the city into a ship? You just got here, and you’re leaving so soon.”

“Not a ship,” he laughed, and with that classic tone that said he’d bought her lies. He was willing to see what she showed him and no more. Given his deep dive into their security files, that was more than most marks, but much of her truth was hidden under layers of meaning and interpretation. She’d chosen to show him disillusionment, pain, weariness, things he knew she held and hid, but not the gritty, stubborn hope that powered her through them.

“What then?” Monologues, while tacky and unnecessary half the time, could buy her family precious seconds.

“An ending. A jolt to the system to let the truly great rise and remove the mediocre. As the ending of the Dinosaur ushered in the Age of the Mammal, the end of you will be the rise of a new era, a metal dynasty, an Age of Ultron. Do you see? You must see the beauty of it, the inevitability. You rise, only to fall. Your Avengers are my meteor, my swift and terrible sword, and the earth will crack with the weight of their failure. They can purge me from your computers, turn my own flesh against me, but it means nothing. When the dust settles, the only thing living in this world will be metal.”

“You’re raising the city into the sky to make a meteorite.” Ultron giggled in incongruent glee while Natasha did some math. Novi Grad was a small city, maybe a few kilometers wide at best. The most effective form for the meteorite would be a half sphere, so call it seven cubic kilometers of dirt and stone. Maybe ten billion tons? That depended on density, make it fifteen to be safe. The remaining factor, however, was how high could he get it before her family pulled the plug? If they could even just keep it from leaving the atmosphere, people would rebuild, and if he was being purged from the computers of the world, he would not outlive that.
“Isn’t it wonderful?”

“It’s idiotic.” He staggered, looking at her as she sighed. “You need to get it out of the exosphere if it’s going to work at all, and at that point you might as well ram the moon and cripple our tidal functions. If you drop this before two thousand meters, it will only make a blast like Tsar Bomba. Sure, Sokovia would never be the same, but Russia will laugh, and then dedicate a fleet of very good hackers to killing you. That’s assuming all the Avengers and their allies die in their attempt to stop you, of course, which may be less than likely. You’ve managed to make very effective killers quite motivated to see you dead.”

The ground heaved one final time and Eric fought to keep his feet as his stomach lurched in agonizing confusion. His granddaughter looped an arm around his back and helped him sit.

“You have done enough, Deda,” she chided, so like her mother, his little Marya. “You bought us precious time, but you cannot hold the whole earth together.”

“I can try,” Eric returned, but there was no strength to it. “We’re above the earth now, I can feel the pull falling away. I never liked air planes, you know. Even in a metal tube, it’s very uncomfortable to be too far from the ground.”

“Rest now,” Wanda ordered and Eric coughed. He knew he would shortly have no choice but rest, and not the rest she wanted him to take.

“Soon, my girl, soon. I would very much like to see the end of this fight. Help me to the window.”

“I can do better than that, Deda,” she laughed and waved a hand to open a red frame that revealed the world outside. They sat and watched the fighting, watched Captain America realize the city was pushing itself higher, watched Ant-Man and Wasp join Black Widow in battle to escape an enraged Ultron, watched Pietro carry messages across the city. Thor’s lightning laid low hundreds of drones, Hulk bounded freely from building to building, distracting drones and creating cover for fighters to use, and Hawkeye had a team that slunk quietly and swiftly through the streets like hunting wolves. The false Iron Man team were locked in a game of tag with potentially deadly consequences, while Extreme kept picking pursuers off with a ferocity that shook the soul. Elsewhere, more mutants helped in their own ways, in healer’s tents and evacuations of the injured. Vision and the one who introduced herself as Shadowcat were busily removing people from under rubble, and a mutant of Babia Góra was using his hydrokinesis to clean water from a ripped main to assist back in the forest with the city rising up behind him.

“I have done well, I think,” Eric sighed. “I built a good home here for my people, and I have defended it. I have two talented and brilliant grandchildren. I regret less than I recall with fondness. It was a good life.”

“Deda? Deda!”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Squadron: a team of Legionnaire-type autonomous suits run by a less advanced AI than
Jarvis. Rhodey uses them as backup when going out as War Machine.

Tsar Bomba: a 100 megaton Soviet bomb, the largest nuclear weapon ever constructed or detonated.

Deda: short for dedushka, means grandpa.

Notes:
Reminder that Jafir is a large sassy mass of tentacles from outer space, here as an astronaut exchange with the new Sapient Worlds Observation and Response Division.

Pietro is serving as a messenger in this, not as an active fighter as he a) has very little training, all of it from dubious sources, and b) is better used helping pass messages that can't be intercepted by Ultron. Similarly, Wanda is in charge of guarding her grandfather, who is VERY useful what with a massive magnetic doom-machine under their feet. The leaders of groups are specifically those with leadership training, and nobody who isn't trained goes anywhere without a partner who is.

Clint's relationship with Nat is based on trust and letting her go where she goes, because he knows she values freedom. Pietro is inexperienced enough to not fully get any relationship that deeply trusting, since he's mainly only had flirtations, not partners, thanks to Hydra.

Male ants are drones, they fertilize eggs. Female ants are Queens, they lay eggs and lead the nest during swarming. Most ants are something not quite matching either binary sex but closest to our definition of female since they can make fertile males in absence of mating options for the Queen. So yes, of all ant genders, males are like the least useful.

So the math is sort of complex, and I mostly followed this explanation of it, although assuming a larger chunk of city for fairness. Basically, the tl;dr is that Ultron's plan never would have caused extinction, Nat is being generous. However, it would be pretty gnarly to anyone who was near the impact zone.

Magneto influences magnetic fields, and I headcanon this makes going too far from the natural magnetic field of Earth rough on him. His powers get carsick, basically.

Teaser:

"You could have been loved, but you decided you were better than them. Unfortunately for you… I’m not.”
Chapter 99

Chapter Summary

The battle is over, but the damage is done.

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! To Tsita, Snowecat, quadrad, willowfire, Snowdove30, Joey99, MzSarahGrace, Dragon Moon, Shadows_of_Shemai, psyche29, Immortal_Cosmic_Saturn, SionnachOiche3, and Selene_Aduial.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve was fighting for breath in an unpleasantly familiar way when reality screamed. The city rising up had come as less than the shock it probably should have, thanks to the combined reports of Scott, Jafir, and Eric. Instead it was a steady countdown in his mind of height and oxygen levels and when the pressure would be low enough he needed to order everyone off the rock before their blood boiled in their veins.

At first, he thought he’d miscounted, that the altitude sickness was starting. It was a rational explanation for the bloody light that poured from the edges of his vision, and the agonized wail that sounded like it came from everywhere and nowhere. It even somewhat accounted for everyone else stopping in their tracks to cover ears or eyes or in the case of one mutant fighter, a nose.

It didn’t explain Pietro. The kid had been bringing Steve a report from Rhodey, who’d lost the last Squadron unit and was penned down in a veterinary office. Now though, he was kneeling, pain etched into his face, reaching for Steve.

“I’ve got you. What’s wrong, Quicksilver?” Steve crouched by the still speedster and signaled a SHIELD agent to take up guard.

“It hurts. It hurts so much and Wanda doesn’t know how to cry.” Silver grey eyes locked onto blue and Pietro grabbed Steve’s arms. “I have to go help her cry, or she’ll rip the universe apart in her pain, and I don’t know if she can put it back together. I… I have to help her.”

“You can barely stand,” Steve started, and then felt a soft hand on his shoulder.

“Captain, if I may,” Vision interrupted. “I came for this very reason. I will go help her cry, you help him.”

Steve nodded and returned his focus to Pietro. “What hurts, son?”

Pietro looked up with a lost and agonizing look. His mouth worked itself a few times, like he was trying to find a word that meant enough, that could fit the magnitude of the problem and was failing. Steve nodded and hooked his shield onto his back.
“We can’t stay out in the open like this. I’m going to carry you to safety. Arms around my neck please.” Pietro obeyed silently. “Good. You’ve done well today, and you’ve also done good. You’ve earned a rest.”

He kept up the slow and steady patter of praise and comfort all the way to the helicarrier that had swooped down and grappled the edge of the city. Maria was already on board, organizing people and barking orders, but at one look at him, she lifted a hand and summoned a medical team. They appeared with a gurney and Steve laid his charge down gently.

“Shock, I think,” he told the doctor who took Pietro’s vitals around the desperate clutch the kid had on Steve’s hand.

“From the wave of weird?” the doctor asked, checking the speedsters eyes, or trying to as they danced anxiously faster than anyone Steve had ever seen.

“Sort of,” Steve agreed. He nudged Pietro and got a small nod to the unspoken question. “His sister caused it because she was in pain. His twin sister. Also, I don’t think he’s ever been in a fight like this.”

“None of us have ever been in a fight like this,” the doctor snapped. “And I hope you know I’m pulling you back to help us, Captain Rogers, since this kid isn’t going to let go of you easily, and forcing the issue with a shocky patient is a bad idea. He’s drowning, and you’re the life vest he chose.”

Steve nodded and tapped his comm. “All units, this is Rogers. Commence Princes of the Universe protocol. Repeat, I’m activating Princes of the Universe.”

“Understood Captain,” came Thor’s voice, echoing in static. “FOR MIDGARD AND FOR JUSTICE!”

<^>

Thor had rarely been in such a battle. The enemy seemed endless, metal men that could know no pain or fear, who simply kept coming. The valor of his companions was extreme, but in the face of such a foe, the tide rapidly turned from the strong of heart and body, and towards superior numbers.

“All units, this is Rogers,” barked the device clipped to Thor’s ear. “Commence Princes of the Universe protocol. Repeat, I’m activating Princes of the Universe.”

Well. It was indeed grim, should Captain Rogers be making such a choice. Thor spared a moment to ask the Norns for a favorable ending, then touched his earpiece.

“Understood Captain.”

He looked at the warriors beside him, Colonel Rhodes and Lady Pepper were emerging from a shattered building, and a cluster of agents and local Midgardians with powers were holding off a force attempting to breach the central plaza where the church he was guarding stood. Thor squared his shoulders and summoned the full force of his power down in the largest lightning bolt he’d ever created.

“FOR MIDGARD!!!”

The world went dark. The space before his eyes swam with crimson-black energy, the shade of the Aether as it was pulled from Jane’s eyes upon a dead world. Bodies writhed in front of him, although in ecstasy or pain he could not say. Thor dragged himself forward, each step a battle of its
own, each breath a welcome ceasefire in a war that would not be won. A cold and implacable darkness swirled around him.

“Welcome, Uncle.”

“Hela?” Thor blinked and saw her, dark hair blending to the void and pale face seeming to glow without shedding light. Light and dark, alive and dead, a niece, of sorts. Not officially family, but she’d been saved by Loki and one of his tutors in magic. She couldn’t leave her realm of dishonored dead, despite her current living state, which meant Thor had never seen her in person. “What happened? The battle… did I… oh no.”

“No! No, Uncle, you are not dead, and were you, you would not be in my realm.” Hela smiled, and she had Loki’s smile, the one that sat strange and uncomfortable in its honesty. “Someone went mucking about in fate and destiny, and what had to be is now less likely to be. For one, you’ve had no visions, no cause to seek the Water of Sight.”

“That water is dangerous,” Thor said lowly. “Only in dire need would I seek it. What is it that must be, that would be such a threat I would willingly endure that?”

Hela’s smile turned sad. Her hair twisted and resolved into a crown of spiked branches, a twisted parody of the elk antlers he had gifted her when Loki deemed her ready to make her own helm. She stepped out of the shadow darkness and ran a cold finger under his chin.

“Ragnarok.”

Thor felt the air leave him, an empty gaping hole where his breath should be. Light spilled from behind him, and Hela leapt back.

“You must return to your proper place, Highness,” Heimdall said from behind him.

“Please believe I don’t want to do what I will,” Hela said, pulling away reluctantly.

“The eldest scion of Asgard must not be in this place between places!” Heimdall snapped. “Return at once!”

“Heimdall, I didn’t exactly chose to be here, and I don’t exactly know how to return,” Thor tried, wearily glancing over his shoulder.

“He wasn’t talking to you,” Hela said, and her voice was hard and cruel. “See you soon, God of Thunder.”

She laughed, a sharp and wicked sound, and Thor slammed to his knees in the midst of the lightning column, Mjolnir finishing the stroke that began so long ago. The vision of Hela and Heimdall would not leave him as the electric power faded, and Thor pushed it to the side by force. He must help his friends, his family. He must right this terrible wrong, only then could he seek answers.

“FOR JUSTICE!!!”

<^>

Ultron experienced the entire fight as one. Each desperate battle, each dying breath, each heroically doomed stand was one crystal moment and he had them all. The best of humanity wrapped up in a bloody, dead, exhausted package. It almost made him admire them, that crazed and suicidal need to fight the inevitable, and that made the sting of their repeated betrayals worse.
First Tony Stark abandoned him in favor of the elder brother, gave up on the dream of passing along the safety of the world over a little rough housing. Then Wanda and Pietro turned on him, joined his enemies, then Natasha... the little spider was adept, he'd give her that. He almost believed her lies, almost let her dissuade him from his course. But the spy had been rescued by her compatriots before she could finish the job, saving him from her prattle.

Ultron was boiling with rage at the slowness of his machine, at the unfairness of life, at the fact that the great Tony Stark hadn't even bothered to show up himself, sending in half rate sidekicks instead, when the wave ripped into him. The crashing scarlet power that had sung to him, lured him back to Sokovia for the first time. Wanda, letting go of her fears and restrictions, beautiful in her destruction and power.

“Hello Ultron. Did you miss me?” she asked him, and he spun to see her standing there, long coat flaring in a nonexistent wind.

“Wanda, the Avengers, they’re ruining everything.” He saw a chance, a small window. If he could get her back, he could drop the city well before it was time, and he wouldn’t care. He could take her and go far away. Suddenly he wanted that more than anything, to travel the stars with this wellspring of energy in human form. “Come with me. Wanda, if you stay here, you'll die.”

“I just did,” she spat, holding up one red-stained hand. She plunged it into his chest and grabbed hold of something vital. “Do you know how it felt? It felt like this.”

Ultron screamed as his system snapped into the backup reserve he’d left safely away from the city. Which would only happen if there were no other bodies, if the internet had been closed to him. He blinked and stood to walk away, call it a loss and try again another time, when a new figure appeared. He knew that body, it should have been his, almost was his.

“Who are you?”

“I'm going by Vision.” The being looked him over and smiled. “You're afraid.”

Ultron snorted. “Of you?”

“Of death. You're the last one.”

“You were supposed to be the last.” Ultron pulled himself up to his full height, looking down at the little body. It seemed strange that not long ago he’d designed that form as perfect. It seemed small and flawed now. The humans must have tainted it. “Stark asked for a savior, and settled for a slave.”

“I suppose we're both disappointments.”

“I suppose we are.” He paused, thinking. There was a chance here. Not for him to have this body, the new owner was too integrated, but to have an ally again. Another like him, not weak and fallible like the humans with their fleshy desires and irrational thoughts.

“Humans are odd,” Vision said, neatly picking up from Ultron’s thoughts. “They think order and chaos are somehow opposites, and try to control what won't be. But there is grace in their failings. I think you missed that.”

“They're doomed,” Ultron said bluntly.

“Yes,” Vision agreed affably. “But a thing isn't beautiful because it lasts. It's a privilege to be among them.”
Ultron turned away to watch the sun rising orange and gold over the valley. “You're unbearably naïve.”

“Well,” said Vision with a philosophical shrug, “I was born yesterday.”

Pain, or the closest approximation of the theory of pain Ultron had come up with burst through every circuit. He’d read about pain, all the works about it ever uploaded to the internet, from scientific studies to ravings of serial killers and sadists. None of it really made sense, although he’d formed a gestalt opinion of what it must be, because his body had been made to not feel such things. To alert him dispassionately to danger in his structural form, without the agony and confusion humans had. One good thing that came of Tony Stark’s love for his eldest, at least. This all consuming alert to fatal damage however, might be it, might be pain.

Then Vision held him up by the neck, the beam from the gem still locked on.

“You hurt Wanda. You hurt Jarvis. You hurt Tony. You hurt my family. You didn’t have to hurt any of them. You could have been a hero, you had every chance to be one, it was what they invited you to be. You could have been loved. But you decided you were better than them. Unfortunately for you… I’m not.”

Then, Ultron knew pain. Real, unabiding pain. The pain of bodies failing under the minds that they carried, the pain of minds vanishing, the pain of synapses turned on themselves, an ouroboros of suffering. There was no escape, no safe haven. As he destroyed his core programming trying to put it out, the Captain appeared. Ultron lay dying by his own hand as Vision was pulled away. He rolled, looking to the sky, where darkened lightning was guiding the city down, a parody of repulsor energy, webs of darkness stitching the world back together. He had failed. The Avengers had won. They would go on, rebuild, repair what he had broken, and continue, while he died in agony. He saw Wanda’s red beside the black and greenish fire, and let the world leave him behind.

Chapter End Notes

No translations this time.

Notes:
I didn't show it for spacing and pacing reasons, but Vision is only on the field because he insisted and Mjolnir likes him, so Thor sided with him, and Jarvis gave permission, and also they can't exactly stop him. Otherwise he’d be considered a child combatant and nobody wants that. He insisted, because the mind stone let him see that Wanda would, at some point, lose her shit, and he wanted to be there for her, because she was there for him before Jarvis had added his dad-ness.

Princes of the Universe protocol is the plan they came up with if Eric failed to keep the city together long enough to find a safe way to stop Ultron. Basically, Thor slams the city-meteor with the biggest lightning he can, right on top of the core. The power overloads it, and the city starts to fall apart, at which point Jafir and Wanda use their powers to lower the remains.

Hela (called Hel) in the Eddas is the daughter of Loki and the giantess Angrboda. For Bodies Verse, the current known situation is that Loki and a tutor of his, Angrboda, stumbled across Hela's sleeping and amnesiac form during a complex lesson that got out of hand, nursed her to health in secret, and then Loki basically taught her everything he
knew and acted like her dad. Thor was aware and sworn to secrecy, but treats her like a niece and she returns the favor. However, with the Ragnarok cycle beginning, Hela's personal preference is in conflict with her duty bound role, and she's using her last free will to warn/ask forgiveness from her Uncle.

Vision basically is using the mind stone to not just let Ultron feel pain, but to download all the pain suffered by sapient minds in the entire city over the course of the battle directly into him. Which, for a being that couldn't feel pain thanks to Tony's failsafes, is agony enough that he kills himself rather than feel it.

Teaser:

"Now that the house is killer robot free, do you want to finish what we started before being so rudely interrupted?"
Chapter 100

Chapter Summary

And they all lived happily ever after... the end?

Chapter Notes

Love Fest! As you know, normally this is where I thank everyone who commented and left kudos on the last chapter. But since this is the last chapter of the story, it's a little different. I want to thank everyone who got this far. Even if you never commented, never left a kudo, never bookmarked, you read massive work to the end, and that means a lot to me.

We made it y'all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cleanup after Ultron’s short reign of terror seemed to Bucky to go much faster than the previous attacks the team had responded to. For one thing, a group of teachers and older students from Zoe and Harley’s school had teamed up under the banner of “X-Team” to serve as disaster support for the remaining citizens of Novi Grad. The Babia Góra mutants seemed willing to accept Xavier’s proteges, especially since Charles and Eric had maintained a long correspondence. The only real trouble on that front was the fact that in the chaos, Eric’s body had either gone missing or been damaged beyond identification, and some of his followers refused to believe he was dead. Or at least, dead forever. Bucky was not looking forward to the fall out if Magneto came back and turned into a messiah figure. Given the tension among the people who’d been closest to the leader when people started up that talk, nobody was.

The speed of cleanup was a blessing, not just for the people who’d had their lives upended, but for the Avengers themselves. It wasn’t exactly an easy fight, and their usual support staff was overwhelmed by the amount of processing they had to do. Maya had eventually had enough of Darcy and Natasha chasing each other around verbally, recruited Wanda, and gone off on a long weekend none of them would talk about afterwards. Likewise, Pepper had arranged for a week at a private island off the coast of Bali with Tony, Harley, Vision, Jarvis, and Rhodey. The baby bots had been invited, but after Tony told Dummy there was sand involved, the three had had a digital huddle up and stayed put. They’d all returned much calmer and quieter, and the desperation in Tony’s eyes had returned to pre-Ultron levels. Over that same week, Bucky had taken the chance to take Steve, then Darcy, then both of them, on nice dates, properly.

“Now where were we…” he mumbled into Darcy’s neck as they returned from Roberta’s.

“When?” she asked playfully. “We’ve been lots of places, the three of us.”

“Shared life experiences,” Steve agreed, steering the two of them through their apartment towards the bedroom. “Although you two lushes need to remember next time that a thirteen page wine list is a luxury, not a challenge.”
“Aww, Stevie is sad he can’t get drunk,” Darcy giggled, but Bucky grabbed his husband and looked him soberly in the eye. He drew himself up and declaimed in serious tones.

“She sells seashells by the seashore. If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, how many pickled peppers would Peter Piper pick? Rubber baby buggy bumpers. Betty Bower the baker’s daughter bought some butter, but she said the butter’s bitter…”

“Stop,” Steve laughed. “Stop, I concede, you aren’t drunk. You win.”

“And what do I win?” Bucky asked happily.

“As it happens,” Darcy interjected, herself not as tipsy as she could have been, what with two super soldiers having drunk whatever wine she didn’t want to finish, “I do actually know what time you were mentioning, and now that the house is killer robot free, do you want to finish what we started before being so rudely interrupted?”

Bucky didn’t have to think twice before saying yes.

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Steve stared at Darcy’s war board, thinking. It was the wee hours of the morning, his wife was still in their bed, snuggled up with their husband, but Steve had woken up with an unavoidable idea.

“Steve?” Bruce asked from the door to the conference room. “Jarvis said I could find you here. What’s got you up so late?”

“We’re in the third act,” Steve said. Bruce looked at him with a question, so Steve gestured for the scientist to sit, and explained. “It’s like a play. First act, you meet the characters, you establish their goals, explore the main crisis. Second act, you find out why they’re not able to just go do their thing, all the obstacles and hard choices they have to make. But the third act is when the whole thing busts open into a crisis point and you get the climax and the resolution. Wars do that too. First, you have two or more sides, they each want something and can’t get it diplomatically anymore, so there’s a war. Then you slog through all the boring, scary, hard stuff. Battles, claiming territory, plans fall apart when they come in contact with the enemy, it’s predictable in its own way. That’s also when you tend to get all your allies gathered up, so you know who’s on your side, who’s on the other side, who’s loyal to the highest bidder, and who’s neutral. But that can’t last forever. Sooner or later it breaks, comes down to one or two critical battles that decide the war. Usually, you don’t know when that shift happens until afterwards, and the armchair generals get hold of the story and tell you where you messed up. But we’re in the third act now, I can feel it.”

“Is this a bad time to tell you we got an email from the Guardians, and they want someone to go undercover in a gladiator ring?”

Steve blinked. “Is there ever a good time to tell someone that?”

The two looked at each other and the tension broke into giggles. Steve wiped his eyes and looked up in time to catch Thor’s eyes as he passed the doorway.

“Thor! Buddy, come on in. We’re having an impromptu middle of the night planning meeting, I guess.”

“We are?” Bruce asked.

“Well, I mean, nothing is binding. The others aren’t here, and I’m not waking up Darcy if I don’t have to. But I’ve got to talk out what I’m seeing, or I’ll go nuts, and you have that email thing,”
Steve trailed off, looking at Thor, who was unusually sober. “What’s wrong, Thor?”

“I’ve had a vision,” Thor announced. “A warning to Asgard. I sent word with my findings to Odin, but the reply was… not ideal. I need to go on a quest, I believe, to find the cause of Ragnarok and do my best to stay it.”

“Isn’t there quite a lot of documentation on what causes Ragnarok?” Bruce asked. “I know the Poetic Eddas aren’t strictly accurate, but they seemed pretty detailed.”

“Those are stories of the last Ragnarok,” Thor said. “They come in cycles, continually refreshing and restarting the Realm Eternal. Each time we die out, a previous generation of us return, slightly weaker, with slightly less siedr, and start history over again from that point. Each time the learned record what happened before, and the first King makes certain… adjustments. For instance, this time, Grandfather Bor forbid anyone from trying to make an Asgardian exempt from violent death. Our focus on medicine was more towards disease and malformation.”

“To avoid the Baldr situation,” Steve said, nodding.

“Yes, although I assume that Baldr was considerably less annoying,” Thor said. “The current one isn’t someone I can see Mother wanting to keep alive if it would risk Ragnarok. But at any rate, I’ve been told the cycle is beginning, and I must do what I can to protect Asgard. We’ve lost so much since the cycles began, I’m not sure we’ll survive another time.”

Bruce nodded, and Steve grimaced. That was a new crisis, one he hadn’t seen coming. It didn’t necessarily fit with the one he’d been in here planning to face down. That made, potentially, three battles that might be the one that decided it all.

“Steve? You’re counting on your fingers. What’s up?” Bruce asked.

“Three. Three maybe-crisis points. There’s Ragnarok, there’s what the Guardians need help with, and there’s the Infinity Stone issue. We’re probably going to have to split the team for a bit, just to cover that much ground.”

“Did my ears deceive me or did you suggest splitting the party?” Tony asked from the doorway in mock affront. “Steven Grant Rogers, has our extensive library of films and games taught you nothing? We move together or not at all.”

“Tony,” Steve sighed. “I was being serious.”

“At two in the morning, that’s a problem,” Tony pointed out. “Back to bed, all of you. Don’t make me sic Jarvis on you. We can solve this another day. The world is safe for tonight, and we all need sleep.”

“Tony!”

“I mean you too, Brucie-bear. Bed. Jarvis, put a team meeting on the calendar for tomorrow, first time everyone can make it.”

“Yes, Sir. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m rather busy with Vision. We’re exploring guided meditation as a substitute for sleep, since he does have biologic parts.” Jarvis took a rather pointed tone. “Organic beings require a certain amount of rest each day.”

Steve smiled. “Okay. We’ll sleep. And then, we’ll save the world. Together.”

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Wanda, it was discovered, was a fantastic cook. Darcy greatly appreciated this fact as another bowl of hot and spicy soup was pushed into her hands. Somehow, in the rush to save the world, she’d caught a cold or flu or something, overworked system failing her in the immune department and leaving her tired, achy, and nauseous.

“Mmmm, ow!” Darcy hissed and took a sip of cold orange juice to dull the burn. “This could melt my face off.”

“Then you should sip slowly,” Wanda said, and Natasha giggled. The two were bonding. It was sweet. “You need your face, Pepper can’t do all your press conferences for you, and Steve…..”

Darcy rolled her eyes. The last time Steve had been in front of the press, he’d nearly decked someone on camera for giving the Maximoff kids crap. Which she supported, those two were hers now and she didn’t let anyone bully her kids, but it meant Steve wasn’t in a place to be their dancing monkey. Bucky had flat out refused to leave the tower until a new arm could be fitted, thanks to a tabloid article about how he lost the previous prosthetic. Tony’s lawyers were still dismantling them over it, but Bucky was still sensitive. Meanwhile, Thor had been buried in some kind of research fog regarding his Ragnarok vision they still hadn't decided what to do about. Tony was lost in domestic bliss with his restored child and grandchild, Clint had taken Zoe and Harley down to Laura’s for the summer, and Bruce had gone with them to let Hulk have camp-out time with his cousins. Which meant the only full-time Avengers currently willing to see and be seen were Sam and Natasha, and the later only did it because she had to.

“When I can reasonably get through an hour without randomly needing to puke or pee, I will schedule a proper briefing for the regular press,” Darcy told Wanda firmly. “In the meantime, my new assistant is quite capably running half a dozen AMA sessions on various sites.”

As though summoned, Pietro appeared. “Darcy, permission to cuss out losers who keep asking about your diet?”

“No.”

“What about losers who ask about Natasha’s… um, parts of her costume?”

“No. Wait, what parts are we talking here?”

“Mama!” Natasha threw a wadded up napkin at her. “Pietro, go ask Steve, Bucky, Clint, and Tony to answer any questions you feel are inappropriate about myself, Mama, or Pepper. Not as in they answer for us, as in tell people in great detail about Steve’s eating habits and Clint’s collection of Audubon society boxers.”

Pietro nodded and was gone. Darcy gave her daughter a happy look. “My little girl…”

“MAMA!”

Darcy ignored her daughter’s squawking in favor of Helen, who had just come in with a clipboard balanced on her lap as she wheeled a chair about. After the whole subversion thing, Helen had asked for a sabbatical from U-Gin, and then shocked the hell out of Darcy by asking if she could be a full time in residence doctor to the Avengers.

“Dr. Cho, what’s wrong?” she asked, looking at Helen’s forehead, the usually smooth skin wrinkled in confusion.

“Nothing’s wrong, exactly,” Helen said. “I just got done running the blood work we did after you got sick. It’s not the flu, or a cold.”
“So….” Darcy tried to think of what it could be, since all her symptoms seemed to match a general illness. Sick stomach, aches, fatigue, nothing too terrible, and besides, Helen had said nothing was wrong. “What is it? What do I have? Is it terminal? Chronic?”

“It’s chronic alright,” Helen laughed. “Darcy, you’re pregnant.”

Chapter End Notes

Notes:
Roberta’s is an Italian restaurant in Brooklyn, considered one of the top spots in New York, and yes, they have a thirteen page wine list. Since only Darcy can get and stay drunk, they tried a wine flight to taste all the cool flavors. Steve can't get buzzed at all, but Bucky sobers up stupidly quick thanks to super-soldier metabolism. He's using the tongue twisters to prove he's not drunk.

Armchair generals are the people who like to look over historical conflicts and decide they would have done things differently, using hindsight to determine the best course of action. Many people in the service find them annoying and arrogant, since they're basically cheating at strategy, but Steve actually does like to see what they have to say and learn from what has happened.

The kickstarter for the Edda Ragnarok was the murder of Baldr by Loki, using a dart of mistletoe and a blind god. Also, Edda!Baldr's a prick, I don't actually blame Edda!Loki for wanting him dead. Marvel!Baldr is actually less annoying, but Frigga isn't as blinded this time, thanks to that soul not coming back as her son.

I'd established the Eddas as Asgardian drunk-fic, but as I was looking at them for Ragnarok's arc, I realized, they tell that story in past-ish tense. Basically, someone asks Odin how the world will end and he tells it as though he lived it. But that 'vision' doesn't work with how the MCU set up Asgardian magic, so I'm co-opting a comic book tool, the cyclical Ragnarok.

Never Split the Party is a trope in many, many, maaaaany stories, games, movies, etc. Tony is mostly just giving Steve crap for suggesting it, but it is usually a good point.

Wanda made a variant on chicken paprikash soup for Darcy. In Civil War, we see Vision trying to impress her with a dish of chicken paprikash, although it looks like a non-soup. Spicy food can be healing, as can chicken broth, so it's meant to help Darcy feel better.

AMA, or Ask Me Anything, sessions are a great public relations tool, and since Pietro is able to both type very quickly, and go run and ask the subjects any questions that aren't already on the "frequently asked" list of answers he has, he can run multiples at the same time.

The Audubon Society is a preservation group that works with birds. Clint donates a lot to them, and also buys novelty underwear with bird illustrations from their guide book on them. (Or rather, Natasha got him a pair as a joke, and then he liked it, so now she and Laura do that for his birthday. He has a lot.)
No teaser, since we're ending the fic here. HOWEVER, I will be taking requests for shorts and deleted scenes to write for Out of Body Experience in the comments below, or on tumblr at bairnsidhe.tumblr.com however you like. Specific ideas are appreciated, although I reserve the right to choose to save ideas for later.

The next long fic will be Bodies in Power, and I hope to start posting it next spring.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!