

Marvel Manifestor

- Chapter 321 - 321 – Data Transfer Complete[820 words]

"But if you want to play games of strategy with me, Alexander... you're still too green."

Nick Fury removed his eyepatch.

He opened the eye that had long since gone blind.

The clouded eyeball had turned milky white. A vicious scar carved across the socket, even cutting into the eye itself.

He leaned toward the scanner and let it read the damaged eye. At the same time, Natasha forced Alexander Pierce's head forward so his retina could be scanned as well.

"Scan complete."

The electronic voice echoed through the room.

Fury calmly replaced his eyepatch, looking utterly composed.

"Skye, begin the backup. Copy everything from file number ten onward. The rest isn't important."

Fury knew S.H.I.E.L.D.'s database by heart. The first ten files contained routine materials and agent records. The truly critical intelligence—highly classified and restricted—began after number ten.

The transfer began.

Fury's side received the data simultaneously. At the current rate, the full backup would be finished in about five minutes.

Pierce was tied to a chair. Outside the windows, gunfire crackled and explosions thundered as Helicarriers fell from the sky.

"See that?" Natasha said coolly, glancing outside. "Everything you were so proud of is collapsing. What you called invincible is nothing more than scrap metal to him."

In the sky, Karl and Tony streaked between Helicarriers, destroying them one by one.

"You're right," Pierce admitted, watching the red-cloaked figure in the air. "Karl Norman could have been one of us. If he weren't so arrogant—if he'd agreed to join us—our plan would've succeeded long ago."

He even felt regret. Karl had killed the Winter Soldier, yet Pierce had never blamed him.

"He doesn't even think highly of S.H.I.E.L.D.," Natasha replied with a faint smile. "Let alone parasites like HYDRA."

Bang!

The door burst open under a tremendous impact. A tactical operative was hurled inside, slamming to the floor unconscious.

Steve strode in, followed by Gwen in her black-and-white Ghost-Spider suit, and a disheveled Sharon Carter.

"There are only a handful of us left who aren't HYDRA," Steve said urgently. "The rest of the building is theirs. They'll be here any second—we need to move."

His helmet was gone. Sharon's uniform was streaked with dust and scorch marks.

Gwen, however, looked comparatively unbothered. Her agility far surpassed Steve and Sharon's—and her vibranium suit rendered bullets meaningless. She could charge straight through gunfire if needed.

"Two minutes," Skye said, glancing at the screen. The transfer was over seventy percent complete.

"That might be tight," Gwen replied. "We'll have to hold them."

Heavy footsteps echoed from the corridor.

Gunfire erupted through the doorway—rounds tearing into the room. Steve immediately pulled Sharon behind him, raising his shield to block the incoming barrage.

Gwen stepped in front of Natasha, her vibranium suit absorbing the rounds without a scratch.

After several seconds, the shooting stopped.

The shattered doorway was kicked fully open. A squad of black-clad tactical troops poured inside, weapons trained on Steve and the others.

"Release Director Alexander Pierce immediately," the squad leader barked, "or we open fire!"

Pierce relaxed in his chair.

He didn't believe this handful of people could defeat an entire tactical unit.

Skye subtly flashed a hand signal to Gwen. Gwen nodded and discreetly tapped Natasha's arm in response.

Natasha gave a slight nod.

Skye typed rapidly, fingers gliding across the keyboard.

Far below, an invisible Quinjet lifted off silently—the very one Skye had piloted here. With its advanced cloaking and the chaos of battle masking any noise, no one noticed.

She guided it into position outside the top-floor office.

Quietly, she shifted her chair closer to the window and pressed her palm against the glass.

She didn't know if it was bulletproof.

But bulletproof or not, it was still glass.

And glass meant nothing against seismic waves.

She exchanged one last look with Gwen and Natasha.

Then she unleashed her power.

Crash!

The windows behind them shattered instantly.

Everyone froze in shock—

"Down!" Skye shouted.

Steve reacted instantly, shielding Sharon and ducking low.

Ratatatatatat!

A deafening storm of heavy-caliber gunfire roared in from outside.

Invisible moments before, the Quinjet's weapons now tore through the room. Within seconds, every HYDRA operative was shredded—some obliterated outright by the sheer force of the rounds.

Three seconds.

That was all it took.

Every HYDRA agent lay dead.

Alexander Pierce was riddled with bullets, his body reduced to a bloodied ruin.

At the same moment—

"Transfer complete."

Skye snapped the laptop shut.

"We're done. Move!"

The Quinjet decloaked, its hatch opening as it hovered outside.

"Go! Now!"

Skye boarded first, sliding into the pilot's seat and taking full control.

Steve and the others leapt aboard. The hatch sealed, and the jet shot upward like an arrow loosed from a bow.

"Karl, we're clear," Skye reported.

"Good," Karl replied, spotting the departing Quinjet at a glance. "Now I can finally cut loose."

"Tony. Sam. Pull back."

"Copy," both answered immediately.

Sam had already guessed what was coming.

Tony didn't need to guess.

He'd seen it before.

A piercing cry split the sky.

Flames erupted upward in a towering inferno. The surrounding temperature surged to terrifying levels—moisture evaporated instantly, the air turning dry and suffocating, like the heart of a desert.

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## - Chapter 322 - 322 - The Destruction of S.H.I.E.L.D.[ 862 words ]

Within the raging inferno, a pair of magnificent wings slowly unfurled.

Heat so intense it warped the air clung to every feather. A phoenix, crowned with long trailing plumes, rose reborn from the flames.

"F—! That's Karl's power?! Seeing it in person is nothing like watching it on TV!"

Sam stared, dumbfounded. The sheer shock and suffocating awe nearly stole his breath.

"You get used to it, buddy," Tony said, watching the soaring phoenix. "He's full of surprises."

The phoenix beat its wings once.

Countless fireballs manifested beneath its blazing feathers, streaking downward like meteors trailing incandescent tails toward the Helicarriers below.

Boom—boom—boom—

Explosions rolled like thunder. The sky above S.H.I.E.L.D. Headquarters blazed with fire. Though it was broad daylight, the towering flames and violent detonations were visible even from downtown.

A piercing cry echoed.

The phoenix's shrill call rang across Washington, D.C.

High in the sky, it spread its wings wide. Flames gathered before it, condensing into a massive sphere of fire—radiant as a newborn sun.

Then—

Silence.

For a fleeting instant, the world seemed stripped of sound.

The blazing sphere descended gently upon the S.H.I.E.L.D. building.

And in the next heartbeat, annihilation arrived.

The explosion expanded without a sound at first—fire swallowing the entire structure. The blast radius surged outward, engulfing every remaining Helicarrier in flame and shockwave. Under the unimaginable heat, everything dissolved into nothingness.

BOOM—!!!

Seconds later, the deafening roar finally arrived.

Where S.H.I.E.L.D. Headquarters once stood, a crater more than ten meters deep scarred the earth. The uniquely shaped building was gone. The rising Helicarriers were gone. Even the surrounding artificial lakes had vanished—erased completely from existence.

The phoenix circled high above, its cry reverberating across the capital.

Countless people looked up.

That divine figure of living flame etched itself into every witness's memory. All of them understood that behind its breathtaking beauty lay apocalyptic power beyond comprehension.

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One week later.

S.H.I.E.L.D. Headquarters had been wiped from the face of the earth.

Natasha Romanoff attended a joint Senate and U.S. military hearing on behalf of what remained of S.H.I.E.L.D.

She sat alone at the front. Behind her, reporters from around the world crowded the chamber, camera flashes firing nonstop.

"Why are you the only one present?" a decorated general demanded from the center of the panel, his uniform heavy with stars. "Captain America, Tony Stark, and Karl Norman were all involved in this incident. Why are they not here?"

Natasha smiled faintly, amusement flickering in her eyes.

"Are you certain you want them here?"

An awkward silence fell.

The general immediately realized the foolishness of his question.

If Tony Stark were present, he'd likely be verbally dismantling the entire panel by now. His wealth and influence were vast enough to end a military career overnight.

Karl Norman? A man who treated governments with open disdain—and wielded power comparable to a walking nuclear weapon. Everyone knew what had happened to the Senate building not long ago, but no one dared be the first to challenge him.

As for Steve Rogers—he was a living symbol of freedom, a hero etched into public consciousness since World War II. Any move against him risked public outrage on a massive scale.

In short, those three were untouchable.

Their absence was, in fact, a relief.

"Regardless," the general pressed on stiffly, "you destroyed an official intelligence organization that served the United States. You must be held accountable."

"An intelligence organization?" Natasha tilted her head. "Whose intelligence organization? HYDRA's? Or are you suggesting, General, that you're affiliated with them as well?"

"I will not tolerate such slander!" he snapped. "I am a general of this nation!"

"In that case," Natasha replied coolly, "what exactly was wrong with dismantling HYDRA?"

The chamber fell silent.

"From this day forward," she continued, rising to her feet, "there will be no more HYDRA. And there will be no more S.H.I.E.L.D. The organization has been dissolved."

She turned and walked away.

"Stop!" the general barked, desperate to salvage authority. "If you are no longer a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, then you are subject to arrest as an international spy. I assume you haven't forgotten your origins."

Natasha looked back at him, expression unreadable.

"I'm sure you won't do that, General."

A faint, knowing smile touched her lips.

They both understood the truth: even if she were arrested, she would be released within a day—and the general would likely disappear from public life shortly thereafter.

Furious, he slammed his fist down, shattering the microphone before him, his face livid as Natasha exited.

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Elsewhere, Nick Fury stood before a gravestone bearing his own name.

Officially, he was dead.

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At the top floor of Stark Tower—now both Tony's office and private residence—the team gathered.

Including the "deceased" Nick Fury.

Tony poured himself a drink.

"So," he said casually, taking a sip, "what's the plan now?"

S.H.I.E.L.D. was gone. Its agents were scattered. No one quite knew what came next.

"S.H.I.E.L.D. may be finished," Fury said calmly, holding up a USB drive containing the organization's entire database, "but the Avengers remain."

He turned the drive between his fingers.

"I intend to assemble a team. One that officially does not exist."

Tony glanced at him.

He didn't object.

After everything that had happened, he understood something clearly: the world needed protection.

But this time, there would be no political strings attached.

If such a team were to exist, it would have to stand completely independent.

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- Chapter 323 - 323 – Homeless Remnants[857 words]

"Have you picked a location yet?" Tony asked.

"Agents Barton and Coulson have shortlisted a few," Nick Fury replied. "They're conducting on-site inspections now."

He made no attempt to hide it. If this was to be an Avengers base, Tony had every right to know.

Four locations appeared on the screen—three nestled in mountainous terrain, one beside a river. Each was expansive, secluded, and ideal for redevelopment.

"J.A.R.V.I.S., purchase all four properties. Demolish any existing structures and rebuild from the ground up."

Tony didn't even glance at Fury before issuing the order.

"Understood, sir."

Fury said nothing. In fact, he welcomed it. With S.H.I.E.L.D. dismantled, he was effectively operating without funding. He had considered leveraging certain assets to secure a base, but Tony's financial decisiveness spared him the trouble.

"So I won't be sleeping on park benches?" Steve asked lightly. With S.H.I.E.L.D. gone, the apartment Fury had arranged for him was no longer available.

"Not quite," Tony replied with a mischievous grin. "Until the base is complete, all former S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel are technically homeless. However, I happen to know a place—premium rates, though. Not sure you can afford it."

At the agency office, Karl stared at the crowd filling his lobby, his expression darkening. The Ultimate Divine Weapon in his hand glowed faintly with heat.

"What exactly is this?" he said flatly. "Two of my tenants moved out overnight. Are you trying to provoke me?"

His gaze settled on Fury. He looked only seconds away from driving the blade straight through him.

"We didn't force anyone out," Fury replied evenly. "They left voluntarily. Didn't even request a refund."

Natasha had always lived in the building, and her lease wasn't up. But with Fury bringing additional people and no vacancies available, two tenants had conveniently relocated that very morning.

What persuasion Fury had used was unclear.

"Fine," Karl said at last. "Triple rent. That's the price."

Triple the rent here was enough to purchase a respectable apartment in Manhattan.

"Agreed," Fury answered without hesitation. "Funds will be transferred shortly."

Karl blinked. S.H.I.E.L.D.'s headquarters had just been obliterated—where exactly was Fury getting that kind of money?

"The source of funding isn't something I can disclose," Fury added calmly.

"I don't care where it comes from," Karl replied, resuming his seat and casually eating a strawberry sundae. "No payment, no entry."

The transfer arrived within minutes.

A professional cleaning crew soon followed to prepare the newly vacated apartments.

In truth, only Fury and Steve moved in. Coulson, Hill, and Sharon had accommodations elsewhere.

For the first time, Fury toured Karl's building in person. The rumors had not exaggerated. The interior design was among the finest in New York. Combined with its location and the subtle but formidable defensive barrier surrounding the property, it was arguably the safest address in the United States.

Steve was less particular about living arrangements, but even he was impressed.

His apartment and Fury's were adjacent to Natasha's. The three of them now lived side by side.

Natasha was less enthusiastic about that detail.

After settling in, Fury resumed his usual pattern of disappearing for most of the day, returning only deep into the night. Karl didn't concern himself with it. The rent had been paid.

That was enough.

A few days later, Karl visited the coastal villa Tony had built for him.

The location was spectacular—perched on a cliff overlooking the endless ocean, less than fifty meters from Tony's own home. The architectural style matched Stark's, though Tony's residence had softened in tone since Pepper moved in. Gone was the stark futurism; warmth and comfort now defined the space.

Karl's villa shared the same breathtaking view.

The only annoyance? Tony had integrated J.A.R.V.I.S. into Karl's home systems—limited to standard smart-home functions, but still intrusive enough to feel strange.

Every furnishing was custom-made. No two pieces matched anything commercially available. Even the pillow stuffing was handcrafted rather than machine-processed. When it came to luxury, Tony operated in a category of his own.

Outside, there were no visible fences.

There was no need.

Tony owned everything within a one-kilometer radius—including the beach below the cliff, where he planned to build a private party area.

Most of his high-performance vehicles, laboratories, landing pads, and hangars were now concealed underground. They could rise to the surface when needed, leaving the landscape above devoted to leisure: a racetrack, a horse stable with thoroughbreds Tony had owned for years, and a tennis court for Pepper.

It was excessive.

And entirely on brand.

Far from Earth, on an unnamed planet, a small spacecraft touched down silently.

A lone figure stepped out into thick fog and oppressive humidity. Superheated liquid geysers erupted intermittently from the ground around him. He moved cautiously, testing each step—distinguishing solid ground from thin crusts ready to collapse.

He wore dark red leather. Through the haze, his eyes glowed crimson like those of a predator.

At last, he reached a ruin.

As the mist thinned, his face became partially visible beneath a metallic helmet. The red glow emanated from its eye slits.

He withdrew a scanning device and swept it across the wreckage.

A holographic reconstruction formed in the air—lines and grids restoring the structure's former shape.

The ruins had once been part of an advanced city.

Now, it was nothing but desolation.

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## **- Chapter 324 - 324 – Star-Lord[ 850 words ]**

Following the route indicated by his scanner, the man eventually arrived at the mouth of a cave.

Faint traces of artificial excavation were still visible. Stone pillars lined the interior, once reinforcing the structure. Now the cavern was silent—lifeless and abandoned.

He surveyed the surroundings, then tapped the device at his ear. The helmet retracted smoothly, folding inward until it became a small, earring-like apparatus.

His appearance was indistinguishable from that of a human on Earth—Caucasian features, blond hair, dark eyes, and a scruffy beard.

He slipped on a pair of headphones and pressed the button on a portable cassette player clipped to his belt.

A burst of American country music filled the cave—complete with English lyrics.

Peter Quill.

Also known as Star-Lord.

The man who once danced mid-battle without warning. The "legend" who, in another timeline, had derailed the Avengers' plan and indirectly paved the way for a certain purple tyrant's snap.

With an upbeat rhythm driving him forward, Quill strutted deeper into the cave, singing along enthusiastically. At one point, he even grabbed a small alien rodent and used it as a mock microphone, dancing wildly as though performing on stage.

From a distance, he looked less like a treasure hunter and more like a man in the middle of a neurological episode.

Eventually, he reached a sealed stone door just as the song ended—perfect timing.

He casually picked the lock and pushed the door open.

Inside was pitch darkness.

Quill retrieved a glowing orb resembling a luminous pearl. The soft light illuminated the chamber. At the far end stood a cage encased in a shimmering bio-field. Within it rested a metallic sphere.

He knew better than to touch the field directly.

Instead, he placed a triangular device on the ground. It began emitting a pulsing glow.

Moments later, the sphere inside the field trembled, drawn by a powerful force. Slowly, it broke through the barrier and shot toward the device.

With a low hum, the orb snapped into place atop the triangular apparatus.

"Bingo."

Quill picked it up. The triangular device, having fulfilled its purpose, went inert—clearly a one-use tool.

He turned—

And three armed figures burst into the chamber.

The one in front was a large Black man, much of his body reinforced with mechanical components.

"Drop it!"

The leader leveled his weapon.

Startled, Quill immediately tossed the orb aside and raised his hands.

"How did you know about this?" the cyborg demanded, retrieving the sphere.

Quill shook his head rapidly. "No idea what that thing even is. I'm just a scavenger. I land somewhere, poke around, see what I find."

The cyborg's stare remained cold.

"You're wearing Ravager gear. You're no simple scavenger."

"It's just a jacket! Found it somewhere!" Quill insisted.

"Who are you?!" the cyborg barked, patience exhausted.

"Hey, hey—easy, big guy," Quill said quickly. "Name's Peter Quill. Totally harmless. Look at me."

He even flashed a painfully forced grin.

"Take him," the cyborg ordered.

"Wait, what? Why?" Quill protested. "You've got the shiny ball!"

"Ronan may find you... interesting."

The cyborg turned to leave.

"Hold up!" Quill suddenly shouted.

The cyborg glanced back. The two soldiers behind Quill paused.

"You might've heard of my other name," Quill said with exaggerated seriousness.

"And that is?"

He lifted his chin.

"Star-Lord."

Silence.

"...What?"

"Star-Lord. Legendary outlaw. Defender of the galaxy," Quill declared proudly.

The cyborg stared at him like he was reconsidering life choices.

That hesitation was all Quill needed.

He stomped hard on the glowing pearl at his feet.

It exploded, releasing a strange liquid that instantly enveloped the two soldiers behind him. Within seconds, they dissolved into pools of viscous sludge.

Quill drew twin blasters and fired.

Two energy bolts struck the cyborg squarely in the chest, blasting him backward. The metallic sphere slipped from his grasp.

Quill dove forward, snatched it midair, and shoved it into his coat.

The cyborg rose again.

Seeing the weapon being raised, Quill tapped the device behind his ear. His helmet snapped into place. Rocket boots ignited beneath his feet, launching him upward through the breach created by the earlier blast.

The cyborg cursed and gave chase.

But Quill was already a hundred meters away, sprinting toward his ship.

He reached it—

Only to find four more soldiers waiting.

They opened fire instantly. Green energy blasts cratered stone upon impact.

Quill hurled another triangular device into their midst.

A powerful gravitational field erupted, slamming the four soldiers together and locking them in place.

Quill vaulted into his ship, sealed the hatch, and fired up the engines.

"Ha! Nice try, idiots!" he laughed triumphantly.

Moments later, the gravitational field dissipated. The cyborg had arrived. The soldiers scrambled to assemble a heavy cannon, its dark barrel swiveling toward the ship.

A blast of green energy roared forth.

Quill yanked the control stick violently. The ship pitched upright just in time. The energy bolt missed by inches, obliterating a massive rock formation instead.

"Too slow!" Quill shouted as he accelerated skyward.

He turned back, laughing and flashing a crude hand gesture at the ground below.

Then—

A geyser erupted unexpectedly from beneath a rocky outcrop.

A column of superheated water struck the ship squarely.

The engines sputtered—and died.

"Oh no, no, no—!"

The ship spiraled uncontrollably, plunging toward the ground.

Quill's face drained of color as he lunged for the controls.

But the cockpit was spinning wildly.

And he couldn't reach them.

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- Chapter 325 - 325 - A Long-Overdue Mission [814 words]

"Damn it—restart already!"

Quill braced against the seat, launched himself forward, and finally grabbed the control stick. He yanked it hard.

Just meters from the ground, the engines roared back to life. The ship jerked violently midair, hovering for a split second before stabilizing—barely avoiding a catastrophic crash.

Quill collapsed onto the floor of the cockpit, gasping heavily, staring blankly ahead. That had been far too close.

After catching his breath, he hurriedly piloted the ship away from the desolate planet.

Back at the agency office, Skye and Gwen were locked in a tense chess match. Moguli, wearing a tiny badge labeled "Referee," watched intently from the side.

Steve sat nearby, observing with great interest—apparently quite fond of chess himself.

Karl, on the other hand, had absolutely no interest. He lounged lazily in his chair.

Since losing S.H.I.E.L.D., Steve had taken to helping around the office. Even though business was virtually nonexistent, he maintained strict discipline—morning runs without fail, sometimes even bringing back breakfast for everyone. Knowing Karl and the others preferred Chinese food, he would jog all the way to Chinatown to pick it up.

Karl genuinely admired Steve's lifestyle.

He also knew he could never replicate it.

Typical Captain America.

[Ding—Mission issued: "Destroy Ronan the Accuser's Conspiracy."]

Karl didn't even flinch this time. The system's sudden notifications were nothing new.

Still—

"Hey, System," Karl muttered internally, "I know who Ronan is. But he's out in deep space. How exactly am I supposed to find him, let alone destroy some conspiracy? I can't even see a strand of his hair from here!"

He silently flipped it off.

This mission was impossible. Ronan was in another galaxy. Karl was on Earth. They had zero overlap.

He decided to ignore it.

[Ding—Host need not worry.]

Before he could react, the world spun violently. It felt as though he had been sucked into a cosmic drain.

The next instant—

Thud.

Karl hit the ground hard.

Rubbing his backside, wincing in pain, he looked up—

He was standing in a bright, open plaza beneath a clear alien sky. A fountain trickled nearby. All around him, pedestrians had stopped to stare.

And they were very much not human.

Blue skin. Green skin. Metallic limbs. Some were vaguely humanoid, others barely resembled Earth lifeforms at all. A few looked human at first glance—until subtle anatomical differences gave them away.

Karl sighed.

Xandar.

He recognized the Nova Corps patrol ships overhead—sleek, star-emblazoned craft identical to those from the films.

Two of them hovered directly above him. Golden restraint beams locked onto his body.

"You are charged with illegal entry onto Xandar. Present identification immediately."

Karl blinked.

Why could he understand them perfectly?

Did the entire galaxy just speak English?

When he didn't respond, more patrol units arrived, weapons trained on him.

Karl rolled his eyes.

Wind blades shot outward, slicing through the patrol officers' weapons. Bolts of lightning struck the hovering ships with pinpoint precision.

"Hostile! Hostile!"

Blasters fired. Energy bolts streaked toward him. Even the downed pilots joined the assault.

His crimson cloak expanded instantly, forming a protective barrier. As a magical artifact, it deflected both physical and energy-based attacks effortlessly.

Calmly, Karl blew the Chocobo whistle.

He vanished in front of everyone.

"Suspect has escaped. Repeat—suspect has escaped."

Within minutes, a planetary-wide bounty alert was issued—Karl's image plastered across Xandar's networks. Charges: assaulting Nova Corps officers and destroying patrol craft.

Karl, however, was already back in the Chocobo Dimension.

And absolutely furious.

"You stupid system—you—%\$#@! You dropped me in the middle of a capital city?! %\$#@—!"

He ranted nonstop for ten full minutes, exhausting every curse in his vocabulary before finally collapsing onto the ground, chugging water to soothe his throat.

[Ding—But you did go, didn't you?]

"...You—!"

Round two of the tirade began.

Eventually, after venting thoroughly and soaking in a hot spring inside the Chocobo space, Karl returned to the office.

No one questioned his sudden disappearance.

They were used to it.

Natasha and Steve were sharing drinks. Skye and Gwen had finished their chess game—Gwen winning by a narrow margin.

Determined to complete the mission, Karl began sneaking daily trips to Xandar, waiting for Peter Quill to appear.

He knew Quill was human. Knew about his celestial heritage.

A son of a planet.

For days, Karl saw no sign of him.

He loitered near the gemstone broker's shop—the exact place Quill would attempt to sell the Orb, unaware that the true treasure lay inside it: the Power Stone.

Today, however, Karl changed tactics.

Instead of waiting outside, he decided to let events play out as they should.

Quill and company would eventually get arrested and taken to prison.

So why not wait there?

Simple.

He marched straight into the most visible section of the plaza.

Sure enough, within minutes, multiple patrol units and Nova ships surrounded him.

"Target confirmed—wanted suspect. Identity unverified."

Golden restraint beams pinned him in place.

This time, Karl did not resist.

He allowed himself to be taken.

Interrogation Chamber.

Karl looked around curiously.

This was the same room where Quill and the others would be processed.

A specialized containment field surrounded him as a scanning beam passed over his body.

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## **- Chapter 326 - 326 – Entering Prison Ahead of Schedule[ 741 words ]**

A man approached, holding a transparent data screen.

"Identity: unknown. Origin: Terra."

He frowned at the string of question marks displayed on the panel and looked up at Karl.

"To our knowledge, Earth has not yet developed interstellar travel capabilities. How did you arrive on Xandar?"

Karl remained silent.

He certainly wasn't about to explain that he had been dropped there by some omnipotent system. Silence was the safest answer.

The officer studied him for a moment before continuing.

"Assaulting a Nova Corps patrol and destroying two ships. These charges are sufficient for a ten-year sentence."

He did not press further. Prisoners like this were nothing new. With the evidence secured, interrogation was unnecessary.

"Transfer him to the Kynl."

---

Deep within the orbital structures encircling Xandar lay the Kyn—a massive interstellar prison. That was Karl's destination.

Before the automated intake system could spray the standard orange decontamination compound onto him, Karl casually flicked two wind blades and disabled the device entirely.

Even prisons respected strength.

Seeing what he was capable of, the guards exchanged uneasy glances and silently permitted the breach of procedure. They hurried him into a solitary cell and left without argument.

Karl looked around.

Layer upon layer of cells rose above him in towering stacks, too many to count. At the bottom lay the central courtyard—both cafeteria and recreation area for the inmates.

After a brief survey, Karl disappeared into the Chocobo Dimension.

He had no intention of actually serving time.

Why would he sit in prison when he had good food—and three beautiful young women—waiting back home?

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Days passed.

Karl made it a habit to show up at the Kyn once per day, usually during meal distribution.

He had already become something of a legend. Every time he appeared, he would wander casually through the prison—and then vanish without a trace.

No one knew how.

The guards had investigated thoroughly, scanning the entire facility. Every attempt to interrogate him had ended poorly—more than one overzealous guard had died in the process.

Eventually, they gave up. Since he always reappeared the following day, they chose to ignore it.

Karl's strange behavior caught the attention of one particular inmate: Drax the Destroyer.

Drax was not known for subtlety or intellect—but he was undeniably formidable. Few dared to provoke him.

Over time, he and Karl struck up an odd friendship. Karl would occasionally bring him requested items from outside—paid for, of course. Even in prison, there were ways to move money.

---

Late one night, Karl returned to the agency.

The office was dark.

"Where have you been?"

Gwen's voice suddenly cut through the silence.

Karl nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Damn it—who's there?!"

The lights flicked on.

Gwen and Skye stood before him, arms crossed, expressions demanding answers.

"You've been disappearing at fixed times every day," Gwen said firmly. "Then sneaking back late at night. What are you doing?"

Karl sighed.

He knew that look. If he didn't explain, Gwen would escalate.

"Fine. I've been off-world. A place called Xandar. I've... technically been in prison."

He recounted everything—though he replaced the system's intervention with a convenient story about accidentally entering a spatial anomaly.

Neither Gwen nor Skye doubted him.

"Wait," Skye said, already typing rapidly. "There's a Peter Quill here. Abducted at age eight—suspected alien involvement. Never found."

She spun the laptop toward him.

A decades-old photo of a blond boy stared back.

"That's him," Karl confirmed.

He then explained the Orb—the Power Stone—and gave them a crash course on the six Infinity Stones and their significance.

"So what now?" Gwen asked. "You're going to help this Quill guy stop Ronan?"

"I don't care about Ronan," she added bluntly. "I care about you."

Skye leaned forward eagerly. "Take us with you next time! It's another planet! We've never seen alien worlds before!"

Karl shook his head.

"Not yet. Xandar's heading for a major crisis. After it's resolved, I'll take you, Wanda too. We'll go sightseeing."

That seemed to satisfy them.

---

The next morning, Karl arrived at the office looking utterly drained.

Dark circles framed his eyes.

Steve stared in alarm. "Karl... when was the last time you slept?"

Gwen and Skye exchanged suppressed laughter.

It wasn't lack of sleep.

It was... other exertions.

Karl waved a hand weakly. "Self-inflicted. I'll recover."

He collapsed into his chair and began circulating magic through his body. Wind and ice elements flowed through his system, revitalizing him within minutes.

Color returned to his face.

He shot Gwen and Skye a glare.

Perhaps they shouldn't have pushed things quite that far last night.

He pulled out a small alarm clock—set to Kyn's time cycle.

It was almost recreation hour.

Time to make an appearance.

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- Chapter 327 - 327 – A Gathering of Misfits
- Novel Fire

Chapter 327 - 327 – A Gathering of Misfits

[664 words]

Meanwhile, on Xandar—

A small raccoon stood in the plaza holding a transparent scanning panel, sweeping it back and forth over passersby while muttering to himself.

"This one's an idiot... that one's a creep... wow, that guy's brain activity is tragic..."

He even scanned a random child without shame.

Beside him, a towering tree-like humanoid bent over a fountain, noisily gulping down the water as if it were the finest beverage in the galaxy.

"Groot, can you stop drinking from the public fountain? That's disgusting."

"I am Groot."

"You are absolutely drinking it. I can see it dripping off your face!"

The raccoon pointed accusingly at the water trickling from Groot's bark-like chin.

Suddenly, the scanner in his paw flashed red.

He turned, following the indicated trajectory, and spotted his target across a bridge—a man flirting shamelessly with a red-skinned woman.

"Ohhh, look at that. It's this loser. And he's worth that much? We're rich, Groot!"

Rocket grinned wickedly.

Groot, meanwhile, continued happily slurping fountain water.

After parting ways with the red-skinned beauty, Peter Quill headed straight for the broker's shop.

The shopkeeper was an alien with no resemblance whatsoever to a human.

"Mr. Quill," the broker greeted as Quill stepped inside.

Quill placed the Orb on the counter.

"Orb delivered. Mission complete."

"Where is Yondu?" the broker asked immediately. "He was supposed to handle this."

"Busy," Quill replied smoothly. "Sent me instead."

He tapped the metallic sphere.

"So... what is this thing, exactly?"

After studying it during his travels, he had already deduced that the sphere was merely a container. The real treasure lay inside.

"I do not disclose information about acquired objects," the broker said coldly. "Nor about my clients."

Translation: Not telling you.

"Come on," Quill pleaded. "I nearly got killed for this. Just a hint?"

"No."

Quill sighed dramatically. "I ran into some guys with cybernetic junk sticking out of their heads. Said they worked for someone named Ronan."

The broker froze.

"...You're certain they said Ronan?"

"I'm in my thirties, not hard of hearing."

The broker's composure cracked.

"If Ronan is involved, this deal is off. I will not do business connected to that fanatic. Take the Orb and leave. Immediately."

He shoved the Orb back into Quill's hands and physically pushed him out of the shop.

"Who is this guy?" Quill demanded. "You're acting like he's a boogeyman."

"Ronan the Accuser," the broker whispered fearfully. "A Kree extremist. He rejects the peace treaty with Xandar. He believes only in conquest. In annihilation. He will not stop until this world burns."

And with that, the door slammed shut and locked from within.

"We had an agreement!" Quill shouted.

Silence.

He turned—

And noticed a green-skinned woman leaning casually against the wall, eating a piece of alien fruit.

"You look like you just got dumped," she observed coolly.

Quill punched the door in frustration.

"He bailed on me. I hate people who go back on their word."

He straightened and flashed his signature grin.

"Peter Quill. Also known as Star-Lord. And you are...?"

"So you're special?" she asked, stepping closer.

"Most people say that. I'm very humble about it."

She smiled faintly.

Then suddenly—

She snatched the Orb from his hand and kicked him flat onto his back.

Gamora bolted.

"Hey!"

Quill sprang up and hurled two small spherical devices. Midair, they expanded into a tether that wrapped around Gamora's legs, sending her tumbling.

He lunged for the Orb—

She swept his feet out from under him.

They rolled across the pavement, grappling fiercely. Neither gained the upper hand.

Quill reached for his blaster.

Gamora stomped on his hand and pinned him down, straddling him with lethal precision.

Just as she prepared to finish it—

A blur tackled her from the side.

Rocket.

Groot lumbered forward holding a sack.

"Bag him! Bag him!"

Rocket shouted.

Groot extended wooden tendrils, wrapping around Gamora and attempting to shove her into the sack.

"Not her! The guy! Do you even know what gender is?!"

Rocket grabbed at Gamora's hair in frustration.

Quill seized the opportunity, scooped up the Orb, and ran.

Gamora hurled Rocket aside and flicked a dagger with deadly accuracy.

The blade sliced across Quill's palm.

The Orb slipped from his grasp and clattered onto the ground.

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## **- Chapter 328 - 328 – A Show of Force[ 662 words ]**

Gamora slashed through Groot's arm with a single strike and dashed for the Orb, scooping it up as she ran.

But Quill had already anticipated her move.

Leaping down from the bridge above, he tackled her mid-stride, sending them both crashing to the ground.

Gamora rolled smoothly and pinned him again.

While she was focused on restraining him, Quill subtly pressed the thruster unit from his boot against her waist.

"Don't get in my way," she hissed.

"You've still got a lot to learn," Quill shot back with a grin.

He snatched the Orb, activated the thruster, and Gamora was blasted sideways, launched straight into a nearby fountain.

Quill stood, dusting himself off.

"Told you."

A burlap sack dropped over his head.

Groot.

Rocket barked, "Get him in the bag!"

Groot hoisted Quill effortlessly, but before they could secure him, Gamora came charging back. With one swift motion, she sliced off Groot's arm, tore open the sack, and reached for the Orb—

Golden beams rained down from above.

Two Nova Corps ships hovered overhead.

"Drop your weapons and surrender!"

Identical to Karl's earlier encounter.

"In the name of the Nova Corps, you are all under arrest for endangering public safety on Xandar."

And just like that, the four were transported to the Kyn.

---

Karl was already there.

He sat in a corner with Drax, casually eating potato chips. Drax had tried them once and become instantly addicted. Every visit, Karl brought more—and made a tidy profit in interstellar credits.

As Gamora was escorted through the main hall, the prison erupted.

Inmates surged forward, shouting curses, hurling whatever they could grab.

Most of them had lost family to Ronan's campaigns.

And Gamora had been his enforcer.

She walked calmly in her prison uniform, expression unreadable, ignoring the debris striking her shoulders.

"I told you," Rocket muttered while clutching his bedding roll. "She's famous."

He glanced around at the hostile crowd.

"Half these guys lost family to Ronan. She was his top lieutenant. How long you think she's gonna last?"

"Don't the guards step in?" Quill asked nervously.

"They guard the prison," Rocket replied. "Not the inmates. Dead prisoners save paperwork."

Gamora was placed in solitary.

Her cell quickly became surrounded by inmates eager for revenge.

She entered without looking at anyone, sat stiffly on the stone slab, and listened to the shouting outside.

She did not fear death.

But she feared what might come before it.

Below her cell, Karl and Drax sat quietly.

Drax stared upward, jaw tight.

Karl knew what was coming.

Tonight.

Drax would make his move.

---

Quill, Rocket, and Groot were crammed into a crowded cell with over a dozen inmates. No beds. Just floor space. One prisoner's foot rested squarely on another's face.

Quill was awkwardly squeezed between three burly inmates.

Groot clung vertically to the wall, asleep.

Elsewhere, a group of prisoners dragged Gamora toward the showers.

They intended to kill her there.

Perhaps worse.

She fought, but outnumbered ten to one, resistance was futile.

As they passed Quill's cell, he saw what was happening.

He slipped out quietly.

Rocket wriggled free from the bottom of the pile, fur matted, and shook Groot awake.

They followed.

---

In the showers, Gamora was cornered.

Crude shivs glinted under dim lights.

"Gamora," one inmate snarled, jagged teeth bared. "You butchered your way across the galaxy. Sentence: death."

He stepped forward.

A thunderous voice boomed from behind them.

"Try it."

All heads turned.

Drax stood in the doorway.

Silence fell instantly.

Even the most violent inmates hesitated. Drax's reputation preceded him.

He never involved himself in prison factions.

Until now.

Karl leaned casually against the circular doorway, amused.

The so-called "Guardians of the Galaxy" were finally assembling—in a prison shower.

He discreetly recorded the scene on his phone.

Quill, Rocket, and Groot slipped in through another corridor, watching from the shadows.

"Ronan murdered my wife and daughter," Drax said coldly. "Her death belongs to me."

The crowd parted.

He took a knife from one of the inmates.

"I will repay Ronan in blood. Starting with his servant."

He raised the blade.

Gamora moved.

In a blur, she disarmed two inmates, incapacitated them, and spun behind Drax. A stolen knife pressed against his throat—another at a second man's neck.

The room froze.

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- Chapter 329 - 329 – A Meeting in the Showers[709 words]

"I am not Ronan's servant. And I am not Thanos's."

Gamora's face was dark and resolute.

"I am your only chance to kill Ronan."

She locked eyes with Drax.

"AAARGH!"

With a furious roar, Drax seized her by the throat and lifted her off the ground. The crushing force cut off her air instantly.

"Enough lies. I can kill you right now!"

He raised the knife, ready to plunge it into her abdomen.

"Stop!"

Quill's voice rang out.

He stepped forward at last. Rocket followed with an exasperated expression, Groot lumbering behind.

"Hey—big guy," Quill began cautiously. "You want Ronan dead, right? She's betrayed him. He won't forgive that. When Ronan comes for her, you can just..."

Quill drew a finger across his throat in a slicing motion.

Drax stared at him blankly.

"Why would I draw a circle on Ronan's neck with my finger?"

"...What?"

Quill blinked—then realized.

"Oh! It's a metaphor. It means you cut his throat. Kill him. Everyone knows that."

He looked around for support.

The surrounding inmates nodded quickly.

Drax shot them a glare.

They immediately began shaking their heads instead.

"No. We do not know."

Quill ignored them and pressed on.

"The point is, she's more useful alive than dead."

Drax considered this.

After a tense moment, he released Gamora, tossing her aside. She collapsed to the floor, coughing violently as air rushed back into her lungs.

Off to the side, Karl quietly finished recording and slipped his phone away.

"Done yet? I'm getting sleepy."

He walked up and casually patted Drax on the arm. The height difference was... noticeable. Karl, at six feet, wasn't short—but Drax was a mountain of muscle well over two meters tall.

Drax looked down.

"Who are you?"

All eyes shifted to Karl.

"Name's Karl Norman. Call me Karl. I'm from Earth. Same as him." He nodded toward Quill. "Or as you like to say—Terra."

"You're from Earth too?" Quill's eyes lit up instantly. "I haven't been back since I was eight. What's it like now? You got any Earth music on you?"

The sudden enthusiasm was almost overwhelming.

"Earth's doing fine," Karl replied. "Better than you remember."

Mostly.

"That's great!" Quill beamed. "I always wanted to go back. Soon as I'm out of here, I'm heading home."

He had wanted that for years. Even if his family was gone, Earth was still home. Yondu, however, had always discouraged any talk of returning.

"Oh, right. I'm Peter Quill. You can call me Peter—or Quill. That's my Earth name. But now I'm known as..."

He struck a pose.

"Star-Lord."

Karl resisted the urge to rub his eyes.

They exchanged brief introductions. Rocket and Groot wasted no time peppering Karl with questions—chief among them how a Terran managed to end up in the Kyn, which was several galactic jumps away.

On the walk back to the cells, Quill trailed Gamora.

"I don't care whether you live or die," she said coldly.

"Then why didn't you let the big guy kill you?"

"Because you know someone who'll buy the Orb."

She stared at him incredulously.

"We're stuck in prison and you're still thinking about selling it?"

Quill looked smug and glanced at Rocket.

"I've broken out of prison over twenty times. This place? Easy."

Rocket snorted.

"Sure. After we escape, I turn you in to Yondu and collect my bounty."

Quill rolled his eyes. That was nothing new.

"How much was your buyer offering?" he asked Gamora.

"Four billion units."

"What?!"

Quill and Rocket shouted in unison, eyes gleaming.

"It's my only leverage against Thanos and Ronan," Gamora continued evenly. "Help me get out, and we split it three ways."

"I am Groot."

"Four ways," Rocket translated. "He says four."

Rocket shot Groot an annoyed look. "Funny how you were invisible five minutes ago."

Elsewhere, aboard a dark warship, Ronan stood before a holographic projection.

"You've been betrayed," said the hooded alien in the projection. "Gamora has turned against you."

"She has only been captured," Ronan replied calmly. "She has not yet delivered the Orb."

"My informant inside the Kyn says otherwise. She has her own agenda. Without the Orb, your deal with Thanos collapses."

Ronan's expression darkened instantly.

"Thanos wishes to see you. Now."

The projection cut out.

In deep space, amid drifting asteroid fields, Ronan stood respectfully before a floating stone throne.

A massive figure sat upon it, back turned.

"Thanos," Ronan said sharply, "your daughter causes the problem, yet I must clean it up?"

"Mind your tone, Kree," the hooded attendant warned coldly. "Lower your voice."

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## **- Chapter 330 - 330 – The Breakout - Novel Fire**

### **Chapter 330 - 330 – The Breakout**

**[ 736 words ]**

Ronan shot a cold glance at the hooded alien but ignored him, focusing instead on the figure seated upon the throne—Thanos.

"She was the one who failed against a handful of incompetent fools."

Thanos remained silent.

The hooded attendant immediately spoke up. "Thanos entrusted Gamora to your command, and you let her get captured by Xandar's forces. You've accomplished nothing of value."

Ronan's eyes flashed. "And what did your informant say? That she plans to betray us all?"

"Lower your voice, Kree, or I will—"

Ronan lifted his hammer.

A pulse of violent energy erupted outward, obliterating the hooded alien's head in an instant.

Nebula, seated below the throne, glanced briefly at Ronan.

Ronan looked to Thanos.

The Mad Titan gave no reaction to the death.

Only then did Ronan relax slightly.

"I ask only that you handle this matter appropriately."

"The only thing I have failed to handle properly," Thanos said slowly, turning around, golden armor gleaming against the stars, "is you—and your petty affairs."

His gaze bore down on Ronan.

"You conduct yourself like a child playing at war. And now you attempt to sow discord between me and my beloved daughter."

Nebula's head snapped up at that, then lowered again.

"Our agreement will be honored," Thanos continued. "But first, Kree, you will bring me the Orb."

He leaned forward, resting his chin on his hand.

"The next time you stand before me empty-handed, your head will decorate the base of my throne."

Nebula rose smoothly.

"You cannot succeed alone. I will accompany you. We begin with the Kynl."

Without waiting for Ronan's approval, she strode toward his warship.

Ronan looked once more at Thanos. Receiving no further acknowledgment, he turned and departed, fury simmering in his chest.

---

At the Kynl, Quill and the others gathered around a grimy table, whispering their escape plan.

"Step one," Rocket said, pointing toward the octagonal tower in the center of the prison, "we need access to the control room."

They each held trays filled with a sticky gray paste—their meal.

"To get inside, we'll need a few things."

He ticked them off.

"First, a guard's control wristband."

"I'll handle that," Gamora said, glancing up toward a guard using one to manage the security doors.

"Second, I need that guy's prosthetic leg."

He pointed at a prisoner not far away.

Quill blinked. "The leg? What for?"

"I have my reasons."

They moved to a quieter table.

"Finally," Rocket continued, "see that panel flashing yellow? There's a battery behind it. Without that, we can't access the tower."

At that moment, Karl and Drax wandered over.

"What's all the whispering about?" Karl asked casually.

"Karl," Quill said eagerly, "we need your help. Want to get out of here?"

Drax frowned in confusion.

"Karl can leave whenever he wishes. He is not here at night. He only appears during meals."

The table fell silent.

"...What?!" Quill's jaw dropped. "You can leave? There's a secret tunnel?"

"No," Drax said matter-of-factly. "He disappears. Then reappears."

Quill grabbed Karl's arm. "Take us with you!"

Karl sighed.

"I can only leave alone."

Groans erupted.

After all that, his ability was useless to them.

Before anyone could respond further—

A loud metallic snap echoed through the hall.

Groot had already torn the battery from the yellow-lit panel.

The entire prison plunged into darkness.

Emergency lights flickered on. Sirens wailed. Red warning strobes painted the walls.

Groot grinned proudly and handed the battery to Rocket.

Rocket stared at him.

"Of course."

"Plan's in motion," he muttered. "Gamora, get the wristband."

Gamora moved instantly.

"I'll grab the leg," Quill added, hurrying off.

"Groot, we're holding the line."

Rocket scrambled onto Groot's shoulder.

Drones descended from above, weapons locking onto them.

"Inmate, return the battery immediately and proceed to your cell. Failure to comply will result in lethal force."

Three green wind blades flashed through the air.

The targeting drones split cleanly in half, falling to the ground in smoking fragments.

Karl lowered his hand, emerald light fading from his eyes.

"Open fire!" a guard shouted.

The remaining drones unleashed a barrage.

Chaos erupted.

Prisoners scattered in all directions. Some ducked for cover, others tried to flee, while a few retreated into their cells.

Groot charged forward, swatting drones from the air like insects.

Rocket clung tightly to his shoulder, avoiding direct fire.

Armed guards flooded into the hall, weapons trained on Groot—and Karl.

Drax roared and plowed through a cluster of guards, seizing a rifle mid-stride.

"Hey! Little rodent!"

He hurled the weapon toward Rocket.

Rocket caught it midair.

His grin turned feral.

"Oh, now we're talking."

He opened fire in rapid bursts, precise and ruthless.

With Groot shielding him, Rocket's suppressive fire overwhelmed the drones.

For a moment, the chaos tilted in their favor.

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