

Chapter 15 - Preparation

New York City - Local Shield Headquarters - Armory

"I didn't know what else to tell him." Clint explained as he slowly disassembled his bow. "The intel was way off. I had to improvise."

"Understandable." Agent Coulson responded, sitting not far away at a bench. "We had no reason to expect such an... unique enhancement. I've never seen anything like those cards."

"He moved pretty quick too. When I spooked him he was ready to go in a split second. Not the quickest reflexes I've seen, but pretty damn close."

Coulson nodded, looking down at the tablet he was carrying, watching the camera footage that Clint had recorded. It was angled down at the abandoned lot, set up before he revealed himself. He watched as this "Maker" tested himself on the various heavy rocks and metal, pausing it when he managed to lift the concrete barrier.

"He is clearly enhanced, those barriers weigh almost two tons." Coulson pointed out. "Not as high as Steve Roger's max as far as the records say, but certainly superhuman. Not to mention the healing. He said it was new to him?"

"Yeah. The conversation he was having with the drone also seemed to hint that these are new abilities, and that certain items are where they come from. The easy assumption is that the necklace and the cuff he put on are the source."

"The name he gave us implies he is making these things as well." Phil pointed out. "And that they aren't technology. Or that he believes it isn't."

"I know, that's what really threw me for a loop."

"Do you think he realizes how big of a deal something like that is? Even ignoring that it might not be technologically based"

"I didn't have enough time with him to be honest. The only reason I made contact at all was to set up a meeting, and if I saw his ability to absorb objects before making contact I would have bugged out and reported to you."

"We had no reason to suspect he was the creator of his suit." Coulson responded. "Or that he had any training at all. I sent the clip of him jumping up into that stance to May and she says it's probably Maui Thai with Wing Chun influences. Something about how he was holding the knife

like he didn't know what to do with it. She did say it was particularly clean, something you only get if it's consistently practiced. Her advice was to fight unorthodox, it throws strict practitioners off."

Coulson went to press play on the tablet, before he stopped and looked back up at Clint.

"Where did you put the tracking devices?"

"One was under the back bumper and the other was under the driver side door." Clint answered, clicking his tongue in frustration. "He must have found them, they were secure where I put them."

"Or he turned the truck into a card." Coulson suggested. "He managed to do that with a four thousand pound concrete barrier, we have no idea what his upper limit is."

"I... Have no idea. That's terrifying though."

Agent Coulson nodded, looking back down at the tablet and pressing play, watching the distorted man collapse down to the ground, sitting back against the barrier he had just lifted before pausing it again.

"Did the person controlling the drone say anything once they knew you were close by?" He asked.

"No, not a peep. They might not want us to know there is someone on the other side." Clint pointed out. "Are you going to run their voices through the database?"

"I already did, got nothing back. Maker's voice is soft enough that the mike was having a hard time picking it up and the drone pilot sounded like it was going through some sort of voice changer."

Hitting play again, Coulson watched the man put on his necklace. The effect of his suit made it hard to see, but there was definitely an extra layer underneath.

"Did you see what the undersuit was?"

"Yeah, got a good look when we shook hands." Clint answered, rolling his eyes when Coulson gave him a look. "I know it was risky, but I wanted to build a little trust. Can't do that without taking a risk."

"Agreed, what did you see?"

"Some sort of black armor. The effect of the suit made it hard to see but it is definitely some sort of metallic armor, made of plates but still skin tight."

"Interesting. Maybe he would be willing to show it to us tomorrow night."

"I bet I know what you'd like to get a closer look at." Clint said with a grin, smirking at Coulson.

"I assume you mean the truck? It is certainly an interesting design. Looks like a modern re-imagining of some of the older style Studebakers. How did it sound?"

"It sounded like three engines stuffed under one hood, but muffled." Clint said with a snort. "So it's some sort of custom job?"

"Oh absolutely. I've never seen anything like it." Coulson agreed, pinching the screen of the tablet to zoom in on the vehicle.

"Well maybe he will let you take a peek under the hood."

"I doubt it. He wouldn't even tell you his name." Coulson smiled, putting the tablet to sleep and looking back up to Clint. "Do you believe that Blonsky's corpse is gone?"

"I...I think I do." Clint said after a pause to think. "It's hard to read him with the suit on, he sounds like a whisper even as close as we were. But I get the feeling he was telling the truth. "

"Hmm... The security council isn't going to like that."

"What about General Ross?"

"He is being surprisingly quiet." Coulson responded. "Director Fury isn't sure what his game is. Either way we need to prove that it's gone for sure. I'm going to give tech a call to see if they can't come up with something on such short notice."

"Prove that the guy turning objects into cards is actually destroying things when he tears them?" Clint asked sarcastically.

"More along the lines of wondering if a phenomenon is disintegration or some type of teleportation."

"That's why they pay you the big bucks." Clint shrugged before focusing on re-assembling his bow.

When it was put back together he pulled the cord back into place, collapsing the whole bow down to its compact configuration, immediately snapping it back out to full size. Satisfied that everything was in working order he slid it into its case, putting it back into his locker before sitting back down at the chair.

“What do you think?” Coulson asked when Clint was sitting again. “How do you think we play this one?”

“Personally? I think we should keep playing softball.” Clint said. “He did good work in Harlem, even after Blonsky was taken care of. You know Stark would have taken off the second Blonsky was dead to go drink champagne and flirt with supermodels.”

“He is getting better.” Coulson said, defending his previous responsibility. “And he is in a relationship with Pepper Potts now.”

“Either way, he strikes me as a good kid.”

“Kid?”

“He is definitely on the younger side.” Clint answered confidently. “I’m guessing twenty five maybe?”

“Alright. Depending on what Director Fury says after he sees this video and hears my report, we can start off with the gentle approach. I’ll want you there again so get some sleep.”

Clint nodded as Coulson stood, tucking the tablet under his arm as he walked away, pulling out his phone. Tapping the screen a few times he put the phone to his ear.

“Director? Yes we made contact... He was nothing like we expected.”

----- *The Next Morning* -----

The next day was a flurry of activity and anxiety. Ema found two devices attached to the truck only a few minutes after I let her out of the card on the drive home. They were now secured in a pair of cards, ready for the next night. We had a long conversation about how we would handle the meeting, agreeing that there was no way that Clint hadn’t heard her talking. With any luck they would assume she was a remote piloted drone, as we both doubted they would default to the assumption she was some sort of artificial AI construct.

After a night of fitful rest I woke up early and went shopping, visiting almost a full dozen different stores. Both Ema and I agreed that the car fixing scheme could wait after we made proper contact with Shield, and that the cash I had would be spent on making a few things in preparation.

The first thing I needed was a better way to hide who I was while also being able to communicate properly. Ema and I both decided that a new uniform was in order, something else to wear over my armored underlay that wasn’t a distracting, muffling smoke monster suit. Luckily I already had the leather jacket from the chop shop. A quick visit to a couple of clothing stores as well as a surprising discovery that there were a few places in the city where you could buy

actual body armor led to creating a dark green leather jacket with a black five pointed star on the back. The jacket, along with the black cargo pants and black under shirt I got to go with it, were now stab proof as well as mildly fireproof, both settling in at C rank. My armored layer got an upgrade as well, getting combined with two sets of body armor vests and leg protectors that were mixed with insulating sheets of rubber, making it resistant to electricity, and therefore tasers, while upping its protection against bullets.

Now that my new look was done I needed a way to hide my identity while still being able to talk properly and seem personable. A run to a few costume shops, a prop store, another music shop as well as a few others netted me what I needed to make my new mask. Combining a half dozen wigs, a few high quality masks, a few pounds of make-up, hair dye, a few voice modulators, a few books on being a special effects make-up artist and a mound of modeling clay got me a perfectly smooth, featureless porcelain mask. It faded into my skin and let me modify my face, hair and voice when I put it on. It was spooky watching my face move and shift as I cycled through the options for my features, eventually settling on something that looked nothing like me. My hair was now black, my nose a bit sharper, while my chin was a bit more square. It was bizarre and I was very thankful I could easily pull it off when I was done working on it. All I had to do was tug on my nose and the mask unabsorbed, revealing its porcelain features. It was impressive, but that was to be expected with a B rank card. The only downside was that I couldn't feel anything on my face, it felt like I had a slab of thick clay against it. It was distracting at first but I slowly got used to it.

My next build was the combination of a simple belt buckle, a stethoscope, a blood pressure bracelet, two books on telling when someone was lying as well as chunks of lapis lazuli, aura lite, sodalite and azurite, all stones associated with honesty, intuition and the truth. I combined that amalgamation with an on and off button and a motor that generates vibrations. The result was a belt buckle with four blueish flat stones with a subtle metal button in the center. I could tell that using it was a double edged sword though, as while it would quietly vibrate when someone was lying to me I was incapable of knowingly speaking a lie when it was on. When I tried to tell Ema that the sky was green my throat instantly closed, not even letting me start the sentence. Even with its drawback the C ranked card was sure to be useful, if limited. I was just glad the off button affected the truth divining ability and the forced honesty.

My final project wasn't for me, but for whoever Clint brought with him to the meeting, assuming he didn't set off my new belt. I combined eight pocket knives together and created an ebony black folding knife that cut off the corner of my coffee table like it was warm butter. The simple tool was an example of what I could make, while still being relatively tame. I knew the ability to produce objects of power was a game changer, especially since this gift giving would prove that those objects could be used by others. My hope was that by producing some seriously good toys for the good people at Shield would convince them I was an asset, one important enough to protect and keep an eye on without actually bringing me in. Because I knew Hydra was somewhere in the shadows. There was no way any Marvel reality existed without those assholes dicking around somewhere. In all likelihood they were hidden inside Shield or some other organization. But with my lie detecting buckle I wouldn't accidentally arm a secret double

agent and with some blood, some hair, and a fingerprint everything I made would be useless to anyone I didn't make them for. With any luck I might even be tipping the scales in Shields favor, but at a minimum I would be making powerful and skilled friends who will help keep me in the loop.

The massive amounts of money I would be charging didn't hurt either.

It took most of the day, running around to various stores, then back to the apartment to spend time planning out the order of each combination to avoid mixing up the wrong concepts and getting something wrong. Even then I did mess up my first attempt at making the disguise mask, resulting in a soft, one use clay mask that I'm pretty sure would have permanently changed my face if I had used it. I kept it despite how freaked out it made me, the idea of the mask permanently changing my face... I almost gave up on the concept all together.

When I was finally done there was little else to do but wait and continue to do my exercises, stretches and forms. I could feel them getting easier and more natural every day. When it was finally time to head out I spent a minute just focusing on my breathing. There was a lot riding on this meeting and I needed to get it right. I left the apartment at around midnight, taking my time to ride my bike far away from the apartment. When I was finally satisfied I got dressed in my new costume, including my black haired disguise. I stretched for a moment, checking out how it felt as I moved. Satisfied that I had my full range of motion I pushed the truck out of its card and hopped in, letting Ema out of her card as I did.

"Are we there yet?" She asked, rotating around and looking out the window.

"Yeah, I'm just pulling over." I said with a chuckle while starting the truck and pulling out of the secluded alley.

"Are you prepared?"

"As I'll ever be." I admitted, my eyes on the road. "Are you ready?"

"Of course."

I nodded, focusing on the road. Eventually, when we approached the street I slowed down. The road was blocked off by traffic cones and a detour sign. As I got even closer, someone dressed in plain clothes stepped out of a dark doorway and grabbed the detour sign, pulling it to the side for me, giving me just enough space to pull down the street.

"I guess we never really did do the whole "Come Alone" thing." I admitted as we continued down the road, now going pretty slow.

"In all likelihood they wouldn't have agreed to that." Ema pointed out. "They probably have a lot of backup, and the whole neighborhood shut down."

“Great...” I mumbled as we finally pulled into the abandoned lot. “Woah... looks like we weren’t the only busy ones.”

What had once been an overgrown, trash and scrap filled lot was now a relatively clear open area. The grass had been trimmed, the trash carted off and the rocks I had been throwing around had all been pushed to one corner. In the middle of the lot was a medium sized pop up canopy with a singular table under it, lit by some sort of lamp. Sitting at the table were two people, both calmly watching as I pulled in. Clint was there, nodding slightly as I made eye contact with him, only for his eyes to go just a bit wider as he realized I wasn't wearing my normal suit. The other person was dressed in a black suit, calm as a cucumber as he studied my car. I stepped out, Ema following after me.

As we walked around the front of the truck I idly reached out and carded it, doing my best to block and ignore the pull and stress I felt when pulling something so large and heavy. I made my way to the table, sitting calmly while greeting them with a smile.

“It’s good to see you again Clint.” I said with a smile. “I like what you’ve done with the place.”