

## Chapter 22 - Leap of faith

It took me several minutes to really get my head started when Ema woke me up, but eventually I was awake enough to go through an abridged version of my morning routine. I took a quick shower while the coffee maker was going and dressed in loose baggy clothes. When we finally left, Ema floating beside me in the truck, the sky was still dark. We drove for a while before I found a place to make the switch to the super truck. From there it was another twenty minutes until we found an abandoned warehouse. I quickly carded the truck and entered through a broken down door.

By now the sun was starting to rise and the interior of the warehouse was just bright enough to see what you were doing. I pushed out the super truck again and started it up, pointing the headlights down the decent sized empty space, lighting it up a bit more. The interior was relatively spacious, with large steel pillars every seventy five feet or so, about twenty feet from the outside wall. There were a few piles of rubble and scrap, mostly in the center of the lane of the structure.

“Think this is good enough?” I asked Ema as she floated around.

“Yes, this is plenty large enough.”

I pushed out her cubed exosuit and let her get adjusted while I put on my super suit, first the under armor, then the deployable armor over that. My vambraces went on next. As I stood there with basically a thick armored belt and chest and stomach armor I couldn't help but feel a bit silly. My under armor was essentially skin tight metal clothing, and for my top half it was fine, especially considering my chest and stomach were still covered and my vambraces covered my forearms, even when my armor wasn't deployed. My legs however felt very exposed as the armored under layer seemed to breathe well enough that it felt like I was severely under dressed.

“What's the problem?” Ema asked, now standing up in her Exosuit.

“I don't like how it feels when my armor isn't deployed on my legs.” I explained, showing off my left leg. “It kinda feels like I'm not wearing any pants. I'm gonna see if I can't get my modified casual pants to work with the deployable armor.”

As Ema began walking around the warehouse, getting more and more confident as she climbed a few piles of rubble and scrap, I took off the deployable armor for my legs. It was a band of armored metal segments and small pouches, connected by a strong and flexible metallic band that went around the whole loop. With a frown I pushed out my casual outfit onto the hood of the super truck, taking the pants and examining them. I couldn't combine them with the armor

without risking the transformation effect, but I needed the lie detector and I needed an extra layer around my legs.

After a few minutes of examining the problem I realized the solution. I wove the lie detector belt through the deployable armor and the pants, hooking into the belt loops before going back through the inner layer of the armor. With a little finagling I made it work, putting the belt buckle off center so that it was accessible in the gaps of the armor. I pulled the combination pants, belt and deployable armor into a card, satisfied that it was treated like it did a container of something. After pushing it back out of the card I pulled the pants on, put on my combat boots and pressed the deployable armors activation button.

The armor unfolded and extended down my legs, the armored plating strapping itself around the pants, seeming to still secure itself against my armored under layer. The armor molded itself down my boot as well, securing my ankle even more. I looked down at my waist and saw I still had access to the belt buckle.

“Well... that worked.” I said, mostly to myself.

I activated my upper armor and watched it extend and unfold, locking itself around my arms, back and sides. It matched perfectly with my vambraces and stopped, leaving my hands unprotected. I frowned and pushed out my basic smokescreen gloves and started putting those on.

“Ema! Remind me before I go shopping to make some better gloves? Maybe improve the smoke ones?”

“Alright!” She called back from the other side of the warehouse.

After another check to make sure everything was set, I put on the torc and activated it, watching the helmet deploy in front of my eyes. I shook my head to make sure it was secure before I jogged to meet Ema at the other end of the warehouse. I watched as she jumped into the air, making it at least fifteen feet up before she came back down. I stopped when I got closer and watched her do it a few more times, making it a bit higher each time.

“That's pretty damn impressive Ema, seems like you're adapting pretty well.”

“It's getting easier to use the exosuit as I teach it more and more about movement.” She explained, turning and stretching, shifting her body in impossible ways. “Still need to try running though.”

“Do you want to watch me run?” I suggested.

“That would help, yes.”

I nodded and made my way to the corner of the warehouse, a straight shot clear down the entire building. I took a breath before starting at a jog, slowly increasing my speed as I ran down the warehouse, turning when I reached the other side. I ran faster and faster, my footsteps echoing across the warehouse. Soon I was running around the warehouse faster than I had ever gone before, faster than the boost had gotten me. I could feel myself being limited by the size of the warehouse, I just didn't have time to build up to my maximum speed. I desperately wanted to find out, to call out boost but I knew it would probably result in me slamming into the walls.

Despite that I kept running, feeling the fatigue barely even start to increase, my armor and my cuff working together to increase my stamina even further. I could feel myself slipping into a trance-like feeling, the sound of my breathing and the rhythm of my pounding feet blocking out everything... until I looked to the side and saw Ema running alongside me.

She was keeping up with me, her exosuit shifting to inhuman proportions as she did. Her legs elongated and shortened to get the most of every push, her joints moving with an inhuman range of motion as she pushed herself faster. Even more impressive was around the corners. When I had to slow down in order to avoid making a Carson sized dent in the metal walls, Ema had no such issues. She would extend her arm, wrap it around a support pillar and transition to a sort of boosted series of hops that spun her around the corner *faster* than she was going at the stretch. After a few dozen more laps I slowed down and stopped.

"Fucking hell Ema, that was impressive. You picked that up fast."

"Well I couldn't keep up at first." She explained, stopping beside me, her body morphing back to its default look. "But I realized I was limiting myself, so I tried getting creative."

"I'd say that was a success." I said with a grin, reaching out my fist. "Feel free to do that, just try not to freak anyone out."

"No promises." She said, before fist bumping me.

For the next hour or so we practiced moving around, jumping, rolling and recovering, falls and throws. At first I just watched and helped her adjust, until I realized while demonstrating that due to my twice increased strength my proprioception was all off kilter. So I started practicing as well, getting used to my increased strength and my armor. About an hour later we were seeing how many front flips we could do when we heard clapping coming from the entrance, where the super truck was. We both whirled to see where the noise was coming from, finding a single man leaning against the truck, slowly clapping. Dressed in a long black leather trench coat, his left eye was covered by a black patch.

"That was pretty impressive Mr. Maker." The man said, pushing off of the truck and walking closer. "And I assume this is Ms. Emerald? I was under the impression she provided support from a drone, not... whatever this is."

“Who are you?” I asked, putting my hand down to tap my lie detector on, ignoring his question.

“Nick Fury, director of Shield.” He said, his eyes following the movement. “I assume that was your lie detector?”

“It was.” I answered simply. “Are we about to be ambushed?”

“No. This is an off the books meeting.” He answered easily, stepping closer. When he was about fifteen feet away he stopped. “As of yesterday afternoon, after all tests on Agent Coulson and his knife have come back normal, despite the fact that it cuts through steel like wood and wood like butter, you've been designated a high value consulting asset. Your existence is a level seven secret, but any details about your location and your activities are kept on a strict need to know basis.”

“And what does that mean for me?” I asked, doing my best to seem calm and collected.

“It means, that as long as you don't do anything stupid, the fact that the money we paid you with got tracked to a New York jewellery store, where a man bought almost fifty thousand dollars worth of cut gems then left in a white pick up truck with a recently register license plate gets brushed under the rug.”

I narrowed my eyes as he spoke, about to open my mouth and tell Nick Fury of all people how I won't take to blackmail very well when he raised his hand to stop me.

“That is not a threat.” He assured me, and the belt was surprisingly still. “I happen to agree with you, that at the moment your anonymity is your greatest asset. We will keep our eye on anyone who might be trying to track you down, and in return you sell us your equipment at a reasonable price.”

“And I still get final say on who I make things for?” I asked. “I get to interview people and send the ones I don't like away?”

“What kind of questions do you plan on asking? The ones you asked Agent Coulson are fine but-”

“I'm not gonna demand lily white examples of virtue.” I assured him, smirking now. “I know that some of the shit you do is necessary. I may not be able to stomach some of it, but I'm not dumb enough to think that makes it evil.”

“Then yes. You also have permission to subdue anyone who fails your test.” He answered with a dangerous smile. “I'd be very interested in talking to anyone who fails the questions you gave Coulson.”

“Then I suppose it's up to you if you warn your agents about it or not. Though I'd like to know either way.”

Nick Fury had a thoughtful expression for a moment, he nodded.

“What about tracking serial numbers?” I asked before he could say anything.

“You'll be paid with cash drawn directly from a bank. No serial number tracking.”

“What about the money I have already?” I asked, flicking out the card that contained the remainder of the money.

“There is a large container in the bed of your truck, as well as a hundred and fifty thousand dollars, all with clean numbers.”

I made to move but Ema beat me to it, taking a wide berth around the director of Shield, grabbing the container. She also made a massive scoop out of her opposite arm, snagging all of the loose stacks of cash and returning to my side. I pushed out the money into the large container and she closed it, extending her arm out to push the case by Nick Fury's feet, before carding all of the other money. I heard a click in my helmet then Ema's voice.

“Are you actually going to use this money.” She asked.

“Hell no. We will use the card until it stops working.” I assured her. “Let them think I'm stocking it or laundering it somehow.”

“I appreciate this.” I said with a cough. The belt really didn't like me being deceitful at all. “It will be nice not to have to worry about spending cash. We were working on a solution but this is good too.”

“Well whatever it is, don't fuck this up. It took a lot to convince the powers that be to play softball and let me handle this situation.” He admitted, pulling something out of his pocket. “I want you to take this as well.”

Again I made to step forward but Ema beat me to it, extending her arm out and snagging the phone, pulling it and dropping it in my hand. I looked at her with a raised eyebrow for a moment before clicking the phone on. Meanwhile Fury almost pulled his gun, the only thing stopping him was the fact that it was over before he knew what was happening.

“That is a clean phone, no connections to you, no connections to Shield. I made sure of it personally.” He explained when he recovered. “There is no reason for anyone to try and track it and only four people know the number. Me, my second in command, Agent Coulson and Agent Barton. It's for emergencies only, so keep it out of your cards so that if we need to contact you

quickly we don't need to send up smoke signals or wait for you to come out. I may know where you live but sure as hell can't come knocking on your door."

"Alright, this is good, I'm glad I have a way to get in contact for emergencies."

Nick Fury shook his head with a smirk, putting his hands in his pockets.

"You're a hell of a lot easier to deal with than Stark, I'll give you that kid. Even if your ability gives me a headache."

"Not much I can do about that." I said. "Though I am curious. Why am I meeting with the director of Shield? I know my ability is a big deal but Agent Coulson was doing a good job. I haven't even made anything yet, save Agent Coulson's knife. Why all this trust? Why is Shield bending over backwards for me?"

"The pitch I made to the security council is that with a soft sell we could gain a loyal Shield agent who could make our other agents unstoppable. That we have no idea how your abilities work and until we do we can't risk pushing you one way or the other." He explained. "The real reason is that I don't trust any group with your kind of power. Having constant access to powers of your magnitude would tip the balance of Shield too far in one direction. We may be a UN backed organization but we still walk a political tightrope and you my friend are one big gust of wind. We can't fall off until we have a way to catch ourselves."

"So my freedom has a time limit?" I asked, starting to get frustrated. "Your aware that-"

"I'm sure that whatever you are about to say would be very threatening. But let's not go there. I've bought you time. Use it wisely."

I opened my mouth to retort before thinking it through. Time was exactly what I needed, time and money. With enough of those two I could build up my strength until whatever Shield could do wouldn't matter. And here the director of Shield was, offering me both. He must have realized exactly what he was doing, Nick Fury was a lot of things through his many iterations but he is never stupid.

"...Alright. I will."

"That isn't the only reason I'm here." He admitted, pausing before eventually continuing. "Have you ever been to New Mexico?"

I blinked at the sudden change of topic before shaking my head "No, I've never left the east coast. Why?"

"Have you ever made a hammer?"

"A hammer? No, besides, the only item I have ever made that I don't know the exact location of is Agent Coulson's knife."

Fury raised his eyebrow, as if questioning my honesty before nodding. After a moment of thinking he began to talk.

"Very shortly Agent Coulson and Agent Barton will be leaving New York to lead another operation in New Mexico, to secure an anomalous object that appears to have fallen from the sky. Reports on the object are scarce but we are also getting readings of strange meteorological activities as well." He explained before pulling a picture out of his trench coat and holding it out.

I walk forward this time, Ema following behind me as I reach out and take the picture. The image was poorly taken, probably cropped from a larger photo, but the object is clearly some sort of hammer. A short handled, blocky hammer. It looked like Thor was on his way.

"You, Maker, are the closest thing to an expert on 'anomalous objects' Shield has." He continued. "I would like for you to consult for this operation. You would be compensated for your time, either monetarily or with resources you may request."

I thought about it for a long moment before looking over my shoulder at Ema. She met my look and nodded. It seemed like the decision was up to me. On one hand, who knew what kind of interesting things I might be able to find during what could be Thor's origin story for this reality. On the other hand, any exposure was a risk, and this was probably going to get bigger quickly.

"Is this an attempt to woo me into a loyal Shield agent?"

"No, but it's what I told the security council it is."

"You're not afraid of exposure?" I asked.

"As long as you're not wearing your actual face and don't give yourself away? No."

I paused longer before finally nodding.

"Alright, I'll be your consultant." I said. "But I want it to be clear Nick Fury. I'll follow Agent Coulson's directions but I won't be drinking the kool aid."

"Hell of a lot better than what I would have gotten out of Stark. How fast can you be ready to leave?"

I smirked and reached down, pressing the buttons for my armor, which folded away, leaving me in my pants and my chest armor. I walked past Nick Fury and grabbed my jacket from the hood of my truck, putting it on before carding the truck itself.

“That fast enough?”