

It took a while for Ema to calm down. While I didn't hadn't regretted leaving her on Earth when I left, her argument of "if you ever do that again I will tie you to a chair and never let you leave the warehouse again" was pretty compelling. Eventually, I promised not to leave her behind like that again. When she was eventually satisfied that I was telling the truth, we discussed what Natasha and I had been up to the last two days.

When that was done Natasha asked us to drop her off in DC. Apparently, she had a few days worth of debriefing to get done, and now was as good an opportunity as any. I agreed and traveled her down to one of my DC landing pads, the one Shield already knew about.

"Thank you, for coming with me," I said as I let go of her hand.

"I had fun, surprisingly," She said with a small smile. "Don't push Ema away, even if you think it's for her own good. You need grounding when you get into crafting."

"Yeah... I think you might be right," I agreed with an embarrassed look. "Hey... Listen... would you like to hang out more often? Maybe... Go on a date?"

Natasha's face shifted through several expressions quickly, almost too fast to notice. I did recognize surprise and happiness though.

"A date huh? And where would you take me?" She asked, leaning forward slightly. "It's going to be hard to beat a different star system."

"That's a fair point," I said with a chuckle. "But the company is the important part, right?"

"That's true. Alright Carson," she said, adding my name quietly. "A date sounds nice, as long as it's not too boring."

I could tell that she was teasing, but I nodded anyway.

"Do you really think either of us is capable of boring at this point?" I asked, getting a shrug in response. "I'm going to be busy for a bit with Thor and Asgard, but when I get back...?"

"Sounds perfect, assuming I'm done with the debrief by then," She said, shaking her head. "Alright Maker, I have a call to make, Shield will send an escort I'm sure. You should leave before they ask you to come in."

"Alright, wouldn't want to be rude and say no," I smirked, going to step back so I could travel back to the warehouse when she stopped me.

Silently she put her hand on my chest, stood up straight, and stretched just enough so she could kiss my cheek.

“Don’t be a stranger.” She said with a teasing smile. “I expect to hear from you occasionally, even with the date.”

“Yeah, okay,” I responded, cheeks a little red. “I will.”

“Good. Now get out of here,” She said, a trace of a blush on her own cheeks as she patted my chest before pushing me back.

I let her gentle push feed into a step back, traveling away as I did. I stood on the landing pad for a moment, a full-body shiver running through me. That woman was something else. When I had finally recovered from the force of nature that was Natasha Romanoff I went looking for Ema. When I found her I pulled her into a hug.

“Ema, I’m sorry I left you behind like that, I should have considered how it would have made you feel a bit more,” I said, pulling back to look Ema in the eye. “There were a few reasons I needed you to stay here but honestly I should have checked and talked to you about it. If we hadn’t been so short on time...well... I still could have done better.”

“I appreciate the apology, Carson,” Ema said with a smile. “I was okay once Jarvis got through to me, but I spend a while pretty upset.”

“I’m sorry. In the future, I will try and do better.”

“So... what were the reasons?” She asked, stepping back to adjust the duct tape strapping on a landing platform to a caduceus droid.

“The main one was that if I was stranded for more than a few days you would be able to continue this,” I said, gesturing around us. Between the lunar science center and the Octopit, there is a lot of work that can be done up here without me.”

“I suppose that's true,” Ema nodded. “It would be unfortunate to lose access to all of this.”

“I’ve mentioned to Tony that if we both vanish, or worse, he can come up here and use the Octopit, and he already has access to the science center. He would be able to make use of some of it but I would much rather leave you in control of it.”

“Well, I would like to think that *any* situation that takes out leaves me already dead as well,” Ema said, actually reaching out to cover my mouth when I opened it to rebut. “Carson Walsh I am your partner, I will not run when the chips are down, and I will give my life for yours there is nothing that you can do about it. A more morally challenged man could change me directly, card me and force me to do as he said, for my own good. But you won’t do that. So there is literally nothing you can do unless you plan on sending me away?”

I stopped trying to deny her and instead looked into her emerald eyes. Eventually, she released me, her morphed hand pulling off my face.

"I won't send you away again Ema," I agreed. "I... I just..."

"I know. But you're forgetting Carson, I'm not human. I never was. The freedom and individuality you have given me through my secondary core have been wonderful but I am still what you made all those months ago. This is what I want, please respect it."

Eventually, I nodded solemnly, my eyes not leaving hers for a long moment before sniffing and turning back to the large group of caduceus droids.

"Right... So I picked up on you not wanting to talk about what you have been up to in front of Natasha, so I didn't push," I said, before gesturing to the new additions to the warehouse. "So what's up?"

Ema spent the next fifteen minutes explaining to me what she had been up to, and what all of the new additions to the warehouse were about. I was very surprised to hear about the progress she had made on the nurse stone project.

"With a little refinement we could make that take even less time," I said, rubbing my chin before clasping and rubbing my hands together. "Alright. Let's make a list of things we want to get done before going down and finding Thor."

Ema and I got to work, making a short list of things before starting to check things off. First up was updating the LPM in *Void Skipper's* engineering room, as well as permanently integrating three more LPMs into its structure. I had done a lot of work on the *Skipper* when I was gone, and the constant struggle with how much I could build at once had quickly gotten frustrating. I also transferred five of the ten trunks of robots into one of the ship's empty rooms, just in case.

With that oversight patched I moved down the list, and started working on my counter-offers to both Asgard and Shield. I wasn't really worried about Shield wanting the Tesseract, I was perfectly content to simply tell them no and then let them build their own bridge to get over it, but I *would* have to convince them to give up the Mind Stone. I could easily find out where it was and take it back, but I would rather not be actively hostile to them. Asgard on the other hand would undoubtedly think the Tesseract was better off in their hands, especially now that Thor knew it was an Infinity Stone.

My offer to Shield was going to be pretty simple, a couple of anti-cuff production units for them to disseminate as they saw fit, though I would shift the designs a bit to make them more useful. Having people impervious to mind control could only be a good thing, especially if they were in charge of anything. It didn't take long for me to throw together a UCM-based production machine that could make a variety of jewelry, all of which would block and fix any mind

influencing or control. I made ten of the machines, and each one could make a piece in about ten minutes.

I was also willing to offer them a few shield generators, at a similar level as the kind I put in the behemoth robot. Unfortunately, all of that would be custom work, so I couldn't get that finished ahead of time.

The Asgard counteroffer was a bit more complex, given that between their access to magic and Clarke tech, I would have to pull off something genuinely impressive. The first thing I did was combine seven LPMs with three literal crates full of repair tablets and energy cells. Between the power of the energy cells and the incredibly potent combination of concepts, the new machine, which I was just calling the large repair machine, would be enough to restore the Rainbow Bridge without me having to leave the Tesseract behind.

On top of just fixing the bridge, I was also going to offer them a few squads of fully repaired, stacked, and even improved Destroyer armors. Beyond that, I would just have to play it by ear. Maybe offer them infinite Uru or a source of Tesseract power that wasn't from the Tesseract. Between that and offering them the Mind Stone I was pretty sure I could reach an agreement.

As much as I wanted to prepare as much as possible, I couldn't stack the Destroyer armors without fully repairing them first, and I wasn't about to do that without Odin's permission, as doing so would put them in contact with the Odin Force. So all I could do was head to the *Void Skipper* and fill up most of the empty rooms with slowly repairing pieces of the armor that I could finish all at once, or destroy if Odin wasn't interested.

With that finished and my list as done as I could get it, I sent Fury a message, that I wanted to get in touch with Thor. After a lengthy conversation, he finally agreed to set up a meeting, as long as I had a long conversation with him as well. I could have told him to get bent and found him myself, but I figured a conversation was the least I could do considering how I had left things during the invasion.

I agreed to meet him on the deck of the Helicarrier, which was apparently exactly where it had been before Natasha and I had disappeared through the portal. I requested that he move the landing pad on the deck unless he wanted me to bring the *Void Skipper* down.

He agreed rather quickly.

The last thing I did for the day before turning in, was to send some food up to Loki and send a message to Tony that I was back in the neighborhood. It didn't take long after that for me to head back into my room and fall asleep.

The following day I got ready rather slowly, enjoying the process of waking up in my own bed again. I had breakfast with Ema, going over our plan for the meeting with Fury.

“He is going to make demands,” Ema pointed out. “He has to. An uncontrolled power with access to a spaceship? Even if they managed to keep it under wraps, there is no way the WSC will just let that go.”

“I know. But I’m not backing down. I refuse to give up the *Void Skipper*,” I said with certainty. “And the robot support either. They are too useful.”

“What if you offered them their own space-capable ships?” Ema asked. “Surely that will count for something?”

“The way Natasha talked about them, it sounds like they will never be able to accept anything I make. They would assume I’ve booby-trapped it or put in some sort of back door,” I said, running my fingers through my hair. “Granted I would put in a back door, but I wouldn’t hide it, there wouldn’t be a reason to.”

“Yeah... I can't say I'm surprised.”

“Neither am I. Nobody understands just how bullshit the Deck is better than you or I,” I responded, summoning the deck to my hands.

“So what are you going to do?” Ema asked, taking my now clear plate and putting it back on the shelf, the self-cleaning cabinets making any food residue disappear as they cross the cabinets threshold.

“I’m going to do my best,” I said with a shrug. “I really hope it doesn’t come down to it, but we could always just bounce. Not much they could do to stop that.”

“Fury knows who you really are,” Ema pointed out.

“I’m past the point where my secret identity matters... Though if things get tense you might want to clear out the apartment.”

“I will if things go poorly.”

“I’m not going to let this go comic book sideways,” I said, partially to convince myself. “I will do my best to assuage their fears, and I’m willing to be flexible. For some stuff at least... God I really hope this doesn’t go bad comic book style.”

“I assume you mean spiral out of control, due to misunderstanding and confusion?” She asked with her eyebrow raised.

“Yeah, pretty much,” I said, rubbing my face before continuing. “You know I had a thought while I was out in space after Loki mentioned his target was going to be New York City. I’m not sure if I’m on the money or not.”

Emma turned from the cabinet to face me, leaning back and gesturing for me to continue. I paused for a moment to put it into words.

“Well... if we take into account the lack of several people, like the Fantastic Four, the X-men, Spiderman... We know a lot of people who would make up a solid roster of Avengers.” I pointed out, Emma nodding along. “Tony, Steve, Natasha, Clint, Bruce... What if Loki’s intended attack on New York was supposed to be the gathering point? The call to action?”

“It’s... possible? I hope you’re not saying that you wished you hadn’t stopped it?”

“Of course not, an attack on the city would have been devastating, and not just because of how many people would have gotten hurt. Loki pointed out that it would have been much harder to gather troops in a city. If New York had actually been the target... they might have actually succeeded.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that the Avengers, for all their faults in the comics, are often the only thing stopping quite a bit of bad things from happening.”

“I think you’re missing the big picture because you’re latched onto the concept of the Avengers, Carson,” Emma responded. “You have Tony Stark, Steve Rogers, Bucky Barnes, Clint Barton, Natasha Romanoff, Bruce Banner, Thor, and the Ancient One all not only owing you favors, but actually liking and trusting you. Do they call themselves the Avengers? Of course not, but they would all come running if you needed their help. Not to mention the fact that all of them save maybe Thor have benefited a lot from knowing you. I mean in what comic book does Natasha have access to even a portion of the stuff you have her outfitted with?”

“I... Alright, that’s a good point,” I said, sitting up and nodding. “I guess I was just looking forward to an Avengers team at some point. Out of all the teams, groups, and people missing from this world, assuming it would pop up eventually seemed like a safe bet, considering how many members of the team are active right now.”

I took a long breath and shook myself off, standing up and stretching.

“Okay, let’s go say hello to Fury.”