

I spent the rest of that afternoon coming to terms with what kind of preparation I would need for the next few massive projects. Between the defense fleet and the shield array, I would be using a lot of materials, and I needed to get them ready to keep from running into delays. I was about to start printing things out, only to realize some of my UCMs weren't updated with the divine essence and Uru, which was something that would really hold me back in the long run.

So, I spent a significant amount of time updating everything that I could, or rather everything that needed it. I wasn't ridiculous enough to think that *everything* I had ever made needed to be perfect, but a lot of things seriously benefited from a single crystal of divine essence and an ingot of Uru.

When I was done updating everything that needed it, I moved a bunch of my now divinely enhanced surplus UCM to the Octopit to print out a ridiculous amount of materials, for both the satellites and the fleet. I also set up a few divine UCMs in the warehouse to print out Uru and divine essence, before whipping up expanded storage spaces for them, as well as the majority of Asgardian materials and resources they traded to me.

That took me the entire first half of a day, taking a break just around lunchtime to talk on the phone with Nat. She had picked out a play and a time, somehow managing to talk her way into a pair of tickets. I was surprised she was able to get them on such short notice, but I didn't question it. We chatted for a while before saying goodbye, both of us having work to do.

I spent the rest of the day monitoring the UCMs and becoming more familiar with the Asgardian shield projector, getting an LPM to print out individual parts to examine their concepts. It turns out that most of the powerful part of the entire projector was the core, which was a deep blue spherical gem. It was covered in carved runes, a singular swirling band of them running around the outside of the gem, set with gold so pure it almost glowed. I could see *something* inside, but it was too obscured to make out what it actually was.

Its concepts were powerful though, filled with magic, protection, shielding, and a dozen others that perfectly fit what I needed.

"I might end up just using this..." I mumbled to myself, setting the core to duplicate a few dozen times in the warehouse before returning to my examination.

My mind, focused as it was on creating a shield, kept returning to Wakanda. They had a shield around their cities, and while I wasn't entirely sure if it was just camouflage or an actual barrier. I needed to find out because any addition to a shield system, unless it was total crap, would allow me to improve the final result drastically. Even if it was just camouflage, being able to cloak the entire planet would probably be a powerful tool.

I could sneak in and scan it without them even knowing I was there... or I could make a phone call and ask to discuss it with them. If the circumstances were different, if I didn't already have two solutions for the shield coverage problem, I probably wouldn't bother asking. I wasn't

about to let anything like isolationism or even small moral grey areas like design theft get in the way of global protection from outside threats. But, with Odin's and the Ancient One's gifts, it wasn't as necessary. While any additional shielding methods would greatly increase the potency of the final result, I knew that between the three powerful shielding methods I had already, the final result was going to be ridiculously powerful.

I would reach out to them soon, sometime after I met with the WSC, which would hopefully be soon. For now... I had a date to prepare for.

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Natasha and I made our way down the Broadway theater's steps, our elbows interlocked as we did. The crowd moved and shifted around us, most people going the same way we were, out of the theater as the show had ended.

It had been an interesting production, with rather incredible set pieces and singing. I had heard of *Wicked* before, both as a play and a book, but I had never seen or read it, not that I had tried particularly hard. Natasha on the other hand had been wanting to see it for a while, so had been very happy to get her hands on a pair of tickets.

"I liked the idea," She had said as we made our way into the theater almost two hours ago. "Learning the story behind a villain, where they came from, learning what happened to turn her into the Wicked Witch, what they actually went through..."

She had been a little embarrassed to be looking forward to it, but I thought it was endearing. Besides, on the scale of weird shit, Natasha Romanov being into musicals was hardly even registered.

And honestly, it was a really entertaining production, enough that I readily agreed that we should see more eventually. As we made our way down the New York street, making our way to our restaurant reservations, we chatted about the play. Eventually, we arrived at the small but highly-rated Italian restaurant, and thanks to our reservation were seated almost immediately. It wasn't the fanciest of places, but according to reviews they served good food.

Natasha chuckled when I pulled out her seat for her, sitting down gracefully. She looked gorgeous in a simple black and red dress, the red a sort of undertone to the black fabric. I resisted the urge to comment on it again as I already had several times. Instead, I simply walked around and sat in my seat, smiling across at my date.

"You know, don't take this the wrong way but I didn't really take you for a musical type of person," I admitted.

"I... haven't had a lot of time for... normal things like that," She admitted with a shrug. "But I've been trying to make time for them, to expand my horizons beyond Shield and my past."

"That's good. You deserve to have a life beyond your job, as important as it is."

She nodded and smiled, but our waiter stopped by before she could respond, taking our drink order and promising to come back shortly. When she was gone Natasha continued.

"Small steps I guess. I got an apartment, one separated from work. It's under a fake name and I don't wear my normal face when I go there but... it's still mine."

"What did you do before this?" I asked, a bit confused.

"Shield safehouses mostly, or the temporary lodgings at whatever Shield base was closest to my objective, and lots of hotel rooms," She explained as she opened up her menu. "I travel a lot, I'll probably end up spending less time at home than I will be traveling. But still, I should have a home."

"You should, a space to call your own is important," I agreed. "Moving into my old apartment was a big step away from my old life."

"Old life?" Natasha asked, looking curious. "That sounds like a story."

"Yeah... just about," I said with a chuckle. "My parents died when I was nineteen. Left me with a little bit of money, and a fuck the world attitude. The friends I had at the time were not good influences on me. We partied, hard, for a very long time, and burnt through the money my parents left me pretty quickly."

"Wake up call huh?" She asked, and I nodded in confirmation.

"Yeah, a pretty strong one," I admitted. "Anyway, long story short, my friends got into some bad stuff, and when they wouldn't listen to me I had to leave before I got caught up in it with them."

"How long ago was that?"

"Oh, a few years now. I'm pretty sure a few of them are in prison, but I heard that tangentially through the rumor mill so who knows how true it is."

"Well, I'm glad you broke off from them, as hard as it probably was," She said, smiling.

The waitress dropped off our drinks, a glass of red wine for Natasha and a craft beer for me, which was actually pretty good. We gave the waitress our food order, and the young woman left after that.

“So, I want to ask you how your work is going, but I’m not sure how much you could actually tell me,” I admitted, getting a chuckle out of her.

“I could probably tell you more than you think, your security clearance is a bit of a weird case.”

“Really?” I asked, leaning back in surprise. “I would have figured they would only tell me the minimum they had to.”

“Kind of, yeah. You are still listed as a contractor specialist, which means you have access to what you need, as defined by an agent with a sufficiently high-security rating...such as myself.”

“Oh, well I’m curious, but don’t put yourself at risk of being called out for it. Especially if it gets out that we... that this...”

“That we are dating? That we are interested in each other?” She asked, laughing at my poleaxed expression. “Your adorable Carson. Yes, they would be more than a little upset if I was feeding you classified documents or information while being involved with you. But sharing some general details of a standard mission isn’t bad, especially considering the level of some of the secrets you already know.”

“Oh... well that's good,” I responded. “So how's work?”

“It was standard, nothing too exciting. I needed to make contact with an asset who was undercover,” She explained, before taking a sip of her wine. “They would have sent someone else but the asset is skittish around unfamiliar faces.”

“Can’t say that I blame them for preferring your face,” I commented, before immediately blushing at what I had just said.

“Wow Carson, that was incredibly cheesy,” She said with a smile, before continuing to tease. “Thank you, I like your face too.”

We both had a laugh, before drifting into more casual conversation. We talked about our favorite places around the city, as well as Natasha’s favorite places around the world, as even though I could travel around the world in seconds, I hadn’t actually done much explorational traveling. The topics stayed light for the most part, neither of us really feeling up for any more heavy talk. Eventually, the waiter dropped off our food, a large plate of fettuccine alfredo for myself, while Nat got a plate of shrimp scampi.

The food was pretty good, though most food was just “pretty good” these days, between Alfred’s cooking and my recent trip to Asgard. Still, we continued talking and laughing as we ate,

enjoying each other's company and the casual atmosphere the restaurant had. Eventually, though, dinner was finished and we left the restaurant, our arms once again linked together. We walked around the block a bit, not really concerned that it was starting to get late.

“So... I could drop you off somewhere,” I offered as we stepped through a park. “Or, we could travel somewhere where it’s still bright out and fly around a bit. I noticed you enjoyed it last time. Unless you still want to keep it normal...”

Natasha’s eyes went wide and she looked at me, her lips curling into a smile.

“Well... I suppose it's been normal enough,” She said, still smiling before looking down. “I’ll need some new clothes, this isn’t exactly flight-safe.”

“Don't worry, I’ve got it taken care of,” I assured her a confident grin. “Ready?”

She raised her eyebrow but nodded, and I traveled us away to my firing range, where the sun was still up, if not slowly getting closer to sunset.

“A gun range?” She asked, looking at me curiously. “Really?”

“It’s in the middle of nowhere with a place for you to change,” I said with a shrug, gesturing to one of the structures nearby. “First, we need to get it bound to you.”

I pushed a singular black uniform, lightly armored with a zipper that went along the front. It was based on the uniform I had seen her in before, but that was just the beginning.

“Armor? But I’m already bulletproof for the most part... unless...” She looked at me with wide eyes. “You didn’t?”

“If you mean did I make a suit for you that will shift into pretty much any outfit, of any material that you want?” I asked with a smirk. “Then yes, I absolutely did.”

“What if I had said I didn’t feel up for flying?” She asked, taking the outfit from me and running her hands along the material.

“I would have found an excuse to give it to you eventually,” I answered with a shrug. “Now c’mon, let’s get it bound to you so you can experiment with it a bit before we go flying.”

She nodded and we quickly bound the new outfit to her, and she disappeared into one of the structures, coming out a few moments later. As she walked out her outfit shifted, going from the black, lightly armored suit to a pair of whitewash jeans, a casual red T-shirt, and a leather bomber jacket on top of that.

“Impressive, how do you like it?” I asked, doing my best to appreciate the outfit and not look like I was leering.

“You just made me the most dangerous spy in the world,” She said with a smile, coming over and kissing me on the cheek, stepping back just as quickly. “This is amazing.”

“I’m glad you like it,” I said, my face more than a bit warm. “It’s self-cleaning and self-repairing if you leave it out in the sun. It’s also bulletproof and will absorb a lot of normal kinetic energy as well.”

“Thank you, Carson. This is... it’s a lot.”

“I know, and I don’t want you to think that I’m trying to overwhelm you with gifts or anything like that,” I tried to assure her. “You mentioned wanting something like this and to be honest having an outfit like that is really cool.”

I admitted before shifting my own clothes into something similar to what she was wearing, though my shirt was green.

“Oh great, the WSC is going to freak when they hear you have one too,” She said with an eye roll. “So... where are the wings?”

I pushed out her wings for the night, helping her put them on. She activated the strap system and it wrapped itself tighter around her, molding to her body and forming a close attachment. I gave it a tug to make sure it was secure before stepping back. As I did I could see her outfit shifting under the straps, probably changing to be more comfortable.

“All set?” I asked, and she nodded.

“Everything feels good,” She said with an eager smile.

“Good...” I said with nod, before summoning my own wings, the green dust of my armor fluttering around for a moment. “Now try and keep up!”

I flapped my wings and hurtled into the sky, stopping forty or fifty feet in the air for her to catch up. We flew for a while, exploring the area around my shooting range, swooping, and diving around. I kept myself to a reasonable speed, not wanting to completely outpace her. I had been tempted to lend Natasha the new and improved, divine and Uru augmented wings, but the ridiculous speeds they could reach were pretty dangerous without a set of armor like Panoply.

Eventually, after an hour or so of flying around, the sun started to set properly. Both of us met high in the air, floating with gentle wing flaps. We watched the sun slowly set over the horizon, holding hands as the sky turned purple and orange. When the sun was finally gone we landed back at the shooting range, and I traveled us back to New York.

We said goodnight on the roof of her new apartment, where she thanked me again for her new uniform before kissing my cheek and saying goodnight. I watched her as she opened the roof access of the building and stepped inside, before traveling away.