

Chapter 16 - Bearing gifts

Clint chuckled and patted the suited man's shoulder, who's only reaction was a small smile and a subtle nod.

"Well you know, it needed a bit of spring cleaning." He replied with a smirk, reaching over the table.

I reached over as well, shaking his hand. After a moment I offered my hand to the other person. After a moment he shook it as well, his grip firm and steady. He was an unassuming man who had a cool confidence about him while still appearing so... normal.

"I am Agent Phil Coulson. I'm in charge of the operation to locate you." He said simply before continuing. "As you can imagine that mission has changed quite a bit."

"You can call me Maker, as I'm sure Clint told you." I said with a chuckle, making myself comfortable in the chair. "And I don't doubt that. He mentioned you guys had the wrong idea about me."

"We did our best with available data." Agent Coulson explained. "Who is your friend?"

I saw him looking up at Ema, and I smiled, waving her closer to the table.

"Come say hello."

"Hello. My name is Emerald, but you may call me Ema for short." She said, introducing herself. "I am Maker's eye in the sky, girl in the chair if you will."

She explained, purposefully keeping her movement as inorganic as possible. We had discussed it earlier in the day as I was furiously preparing. While around people, at least at first, she would try as best as she could to not emote through her movement or through her frame articulation, in an attempt to seem like a mindless drone piloted by someone else, somewhere else.

"She has been extremely helpful while I was... resource gathering." I explained. "Speaking of which, on a scale of one to ten, how wanted am I by the police?"

"They would like to ask you some questions." Agent Coulson responded. "But you are firmly under our jurisdiction, especially after your activities in Harlem. Good work by the way, you gained quite a few brownie points when you stayed behind to help."

"Thanks. I'm not happy about how it went down but I think it needed to be done."

“About how it ended. I know Agent Barton informed you that quite a few people want Blonsky's corpse, but he informed me that it has been destroyed via an untested ability you have.”

“My cards, yes.” I answered, summoning an empty card to my fingers. “When I tear one that's full it destroys whatever was inside and the card returns to my deck.”

“Would you be interested in proving that it is destroyed?” The agent says, leaning forward. “It would go a long way in keeping interested parties off your back.”

“I'm not sure how you would prove it, but sure, I don't have a problem with that.”

The suit wearing man gestured without turning around. After a long moment two more agents, dressed in shields standard uniform, came around the corner carrying a large black box. They carried it to the table by the handles on each side, placing it down on the ground next to them. One of them unclipped the straps and took off the top of the box, showing a series of antennas, a smaller black box and a battery pack of some kind.

“This is the strongest transponder we could get here on such short notice. It uses a whole lot of complicated and expensive science to send a signal that can be traced through several feet of reinforced concrete, through buildings, stone and metal. We want you to use your cards and absorb it, then we will spend a few days scanning for it.”

As he explained the agents continue setting it up, placing each part into the table and hooking up wires. After a few switches were flicked the whole thing hummed with energy.

“You want me to card it and then destroy it?” I confirmed before shrugging and looking at the complicated contraption. “I don't have a problem with that, as long as I'm not held responsible for an expensive piece of equipment.”

“It's already been written off.” Clint explained. “It's just a concrete fact we can point to when explaining the situation.”

I shrugged and put my hand on it, pulling it into a card. I flicked it around to show them I have it, using the movement to distract them from my shock. The card was already B ranked, implying it was already impressive and probably extremely expensive. Biting back a sigh I made a show of tearing the card in two before making one of the riskier moves Ema and I had planned. I summoned the deck and put it on the table.

“Feel free to look through them yourself.” I offered, leaning back in the chair. “I'll give you one guess at how many there are.”

I had specifically gone through the Deck during my free time earlier to remove any random items and anything that could lead them to me. Save for my bow, my personal arrow supplies, my quiver, my stealth suit, my gift, a single roll of clear packing tape and the two tracking devices

the entire deck was empty gray cards. Giving each other a look, Clint looked down and picked up the deck, going through them slowly.

“You’re being awfully trusting.” Agent Coulson pointed out. “Clint painted a much more reserved picture in his debrief this morning.”

“Well the cards are bound to me. As-” I started, my throat closing as I attempted to say that most of my stuff is, my belt stopping me from lying. “As most of my stuff will be shortly. ”

“So you really are making these things?” He asked as Clint put the deck back down on the table, nodding at Coulson as he slid it towards me. “Don’t take this the wrong way but that is... fairly unbelievable.”

“Oh I’m aware.” I admitted, chuckling again. “This is all pretty new to me as well. I’m still getting used to it.”

“And you stand by your implication that this isn’t technology?”

“I do. I will not be explaining how I make these things, but it is not technology.” I explained. “It’s possible that it’s Clarke tech, but it’s not on my side of the equation.”

“Clarke tech?” Clint asked.

“It’s a reference to Arthur C. Clarke, a fairly famous author.” Coulson explained. “He created three laws of science fiction. The last one is that sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. Clarke tech is shorthand for that type of technology.”

“And you think that is what your... creations are?” Clint asked, focusing back on me.

“No, I meant that I couldn’t say it isn’t Clarke tech, but if it was then I’m not the one making the tech, I’m just using the effects of it. I don’t think it’s Clarke tech either way.”

“So you believe it to be something else. Maybe magic?” Agent Coulson asked

“Does what I believe really matter?” I asked with a shrug. “I’m not crazy, I’m not insisting that cars are alive and planning on taking over the world or that Mcdonalds is run by lizard people. I make these things and they do things they shouldn’t be able to. No technology involved.”

The lot was quiet for a moment as the two Shield agents thought about my claims. I could only hope they would believe me or at least drop it. Hopefully if they refused to believe magic or whatever powered the Deck they would be able to settle on the Clarke tech theory I gave them.

“I hope you realize how dangerous this is.” Coulson said eventually. “Whatever you are doing, You’re essentially capable of making super soldiers.”

"I know. Once word gets out everyone is going to want to get their hands on me. It's why I've been working so hard to scale myself up, why I've been stealing from criminals and working like a mad man."

"There are a lot of dangerous people who will do a lot of dangerous things to lock you up and throw away the keys." Clint pointed out.

"I am aware." I responded before holding up my hand. "But before that I have something to show the both of you."

I summoned the pocket knife from the deck, not moving it from the table. I slid the card across the table to Agent Coulson. Slowly he reached out and took the card, examining it closely.

"What is this?" He asked.

"It's a gift."

"The card or...?" Clint asked, looking up at me.

"No no, it's what's in the card." I explained with a chuckle. "It is a pocket knife, sharp enough that it should be able to whittle steel like it was wood."

"That's... an impressive claim." Agent Coulson admitted. "But I'm afraid we will have to decline."

"We will?" Clint asked, clearly disappointed.

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Even as an example of what I can create, something for you to study?"

Coulson paused for a moment, before taking out his phone. He quickly sent a message and set the phone back down.

"Is there a price for this?" He asked as he put the card flat down on the table.

"If you're asking if I'm going to demand money? Then no." I answered before continuing. "There is however something I will insist on. I cannot give it to you without binding it to someone, preferably you. I understand how dangerous my creations can be and I refuse to just throw them into the wind and rely on good luck and happy thoughts to keep them from being lost or stolen."

Before either could respond Coulson's phone vibrated. He picked it up and quickly read the message, tucking the phone back into his suit.

"I have permission from the director to accept your gift." He explained. "What is the binding process like? Are there any side effects?"

"There are no side effects, but you're going to want to take your phone back out. I would require a lock of hair, a fingerprint and... a small amount of your blood."

Both of the Shield agents reacted poorly to my list of ingredients, eyes going wide as they pulled back slightly. Agent Coulson quickly got himself under control, while Clint eyed me like I was going to attempt to take them by force. Before either of them could say anything to deny my request I held up my hands.

"I know that's a big ask, especially for people in your line of work." I said. "But give me a chance to explain?"

The two of them settled, glancing at each other. Agent Coulson nodded and Clint looked back at me.

"I want to help." I started, continuing after a pause. "The things I can make are impressive and when combined with solid skills they can be used to do a lot of good. Imagine Shield's top agents equipped with objects of power, force multipliers that can't be matched, copied or used against them. Imagine your average agent with custom made accessories that look perfectly innocuous but offer them abilities that let them compete with the best of the best. I'm not just offering Shield some cookie cutter super soldier program. I'm offering Shield a source of super soldiers, specifically tuned to each agent's talents and preferences. I'm offering a level of variety that will make your agents impossible to predict."

I leaned forward in my chair, the excitement of the potential getting the best of me for a moment before I smiled and took a deep breath.

"And what do you want in return?" Agent Coulson asked simply.

"Well I would need to be paid. Diamonds are expensive these days." I explained, feeling the belt's presence stir at my misdirection. "I would also need to meet each of the people personally to bind their object to them. Like I said, I refuse to just throw this stuff to the wind for someone to snag them up."

"So you are willing to make these... objects of power, but only if you can meet the people they are for." Agent Coulson confirmed before continuing. "You realize that many of our agents work undercover. Just meeting them is a huge security risk."

"No... honestly that hadn't occurred to me..." I admitted reluctantly. "I wasn't joking when I said I was new to this Agent Coulson."

Agent Coulson looked at me for a long moment, studying my face. I did my best to not falter under his surprisingly heavy stare. Eventually he stood, pulled out his phone again and walked away as he brought it to his face. By the time he started talking in hushed tones he was too far away for me to hear.

“Your offer is a pretty big deal.” Clint said, distracting me from Agent Coulson, which I'm sure was on purpose. “And not just because the stuff you're making should be impossible.”

“Yeah, I knew this would kick up a lot of dust.” I admitted, looking back to Clint with a smile. “So were you assigned to this whole thing 'cause we both used a bow or is that just a coincidence?”

“It was a coincidence, I work with Coulson a lot.” He explained. “He is a good guy, a good agent, and he knows how to compromise. You're lucky he got assigned to you.”

“It seems that way, this is going just about as well as I could hope.” I admitted. “In all honesty I knew you guys would come find me at some point but I was hoping for a bit more time.”

“For what?” Clint asked innocently, almost having me fooled.

“To prepare more.” I explained. “Never enough time for that.”

A few minutes later Agent Coulson returned, sitting down in his seat without comment. Once he was seated he interlocked his hands, his elbows on the table.

“I discussed it with the Director and he agreed to let you bind the knife to me. We will then take the knife and study it, run a battery of tests on me to monitor for any changes. During that time he suggested you come with us for protection.”

“Sorry, I don't feel comfortable with that.” I replied, shaking my head. “How about this? If you can figure out who I am, come to my home, I'll go with you willingly.”

“You realize we could just scan your face, right?” Clint pointed out.

I smirk and instead of saying anything, I focused on shifting my hair color through several shades before coming back to jet black.

“Who said this is what I actually look like?”

Both of them looked at me for a moment before Agent Coulson shook his head and leaned back in his chair.

“I assume that since you don't want to share how you do this that you won't be binding the knife to me while we watch?”

"No, I'll do it in the truck." I explained, before leaning in seriously. "But before that you need to answer some questions."

"Like what?" He asked.

"Do you work for Shield?"

Agent Coulson looked at me, then at Clint, then back at me, with a look that showed he was beginning to question my intelligence.

"Yes."

"Do you work for anyone else? Accept bribes? Look the other way when it's convenient? Maybe to make some money or when it benefits you?"

"No." He responded, now looking at me with curious eyes. "To all of that."

"I need specific answers." I said, my belt vibrating just enough to feel it

"I have never and will never accept a bribe." Coulson said with an easy finality. "I have never looked the other way for my own personal gain, monetary or otherwise."

As he spoke I paid close attention to my belt, feeling for any vibrations, and this time I felt nothing. For a moment I was concerned until I reviewed my questions and realized someone looking the other way for someone else's benefit might have triggered it.

"Do you believe in the tenants of Shield?"

"Yes. Whole heartedly. We help and protect people. And with the slow rise in enhanced individuals, a group capable of handling them on a large scale is vital. We deal with threats normal authorities can't handle. The good we do makes a difference."

"Alright, that works for me!" I said happily. "Thanks for indulging me."

"You have a method of determining truth from lies." He stated rather than asked.

"I do. If it makes you feel any better it also keeps me from lying as a side effect." I explained before smirking. "Consider it pay-back for the trackers you put on my truck."

I pulled another card from the Deck, flying to my hand from the table before I flicked it out into the lot, the card coming to rest two dozen feet away before the truck suddenly appeared..

"Now if you'd just push a dozen or so drops of blood onto the table, cut off a small lock of hair." I instructed, pushing out the role of packing tape. "And put your thumb print on this."

“Just... Bleed on the table?” He asked incredulously. “How-”

“I’m going to be pulling it into a card.” I explained, cutting off a small square of the packing tape. “If it makes you feel better you can inspect the truck before and after.”

Agent Coulson shook his head, pulling out his own knife and after a moment of pause cut a small lock of hair off, placing it on the table. I carded it before a stray breeze took it away before holding out the small piece of tape, folding it over after he marked it with his thumbprint. After I carded his hair he nicked his thumb after a moment of pause. Blood dripped down onto the table in a steady pattern. When a large enough puddle had formed I reached out and carded it. The agent of Shield pulled out a bandage and wrapped it around his thumb, giving me a measured look.

“Well... I’ll be right back.” I said as I stood before turning and looking at Ema. “Emerald, stay here and keep the agents company.”

“Of course.” She responded simply, not moving from position.

I walked away slowly, heading to my truck while doing my best not to act suspicious. I’m sure there were half a dozen Shield soldiers just waiting to put me down if I made the wrong move.

I climbed into the passenger side and shut the door, quickly pushing my stealth suit out of its card. In one of its pockets was a normal master lock, which I took and held in my hands while using the suit to hide what I was doing, hanging it and the pants up to block everyone's view of the already dark interior. Taking my time I combined the lock with the blood, then the hair and the thumbprint, following the same process I had gone through not long ago. When I pushed out the knife I was surprised to find its color had changed. What was once a solid black handle was now a dark blue, the lower part marked with a simple white star. The grip, handle and blade remained the same shape, and the blade remained the same solid black, or at least as far as I could tell. When I attempted to push open the blade with my thumb it didn't budge. I smiled and carded my stealth suit before climbing out of the truck, carding it as I did.

“Good news Agent Coulson.” I said as I got closer. “The binding went well, you are now the proud owner of the sharpest pocket knife in the world... as far as I know.”

I sat down at the seat, Ema slowly rotating in place as I moved. When I was comfortable I leaned forward and handed Agent Coulson his new knife.

“It looks different from the image of the card.” He pointed out. “Is that Shield Blue? And... I like the detail.”

“Binding something can sometimes affect the object, especially if the individual is... an outlier.” I explained, my belt only letting me speak because I wasn't technically lying, I was just learning

this at the same time as them. "It seems like your belief in your organization sets you apart, Agent Coulson."

"And don't think I don't see that star." Clint said with a chuckle. "Looks just like a certain super soldier's star."

He ignored Clint as far as I could tell, studying the knife before pushing it open with his thumb. He studied the black blade before looking up at me and noticing my smile.

"What?"

"Just enjoying proof of my craftsmanship." I explained. "I couldn't push out the knife at all."

He raised his eyebrow before closing the knife up and passing it to Clint. He immediately attempted to open it as well, struggling for a full minute and a half before he gave up. Agent Coulson took the knife back and easily flicked it open again.

"Well I'll be damned." He mumbled.

Without a word he reached into his suit and pulled out another pocket knife. He flicked that out as well, slowly dragging his now bonded knife along the dull top of the blade. A soft scraping noise emanated out as his new knife carved a curling sliver of metal off. Both of the agents looked at me, their eyes wide. All I could do was grin, leaning back in my seat, basking in their disbelief.

This was going well.