

About an hour later I landed on the outskirts of a farmhouse, deactivating my stealth band as I did. My armor slid back into its undeployed state as well, shifting into its basic chest armor form. I looked around, taking the frankly picturesque image in front of me. I was standing on a dirt driveway, about a hundred feet from an old but still in decent shape house, an older and in less decent shaped barn further behind that. It was surrounded by a large green field that spread out, especially in the direction of the barn. A decent sized yard was marked off by a split rail fence that encircled the entire house, save for a few gates and a large opening along the driveway.

With a long breath I shook myself and started walking to the house, still uncertain what I was walking into. Natasha had obviously had company, but beyond the mystery woman and Clint I had no idea who else would be there.

Still wondering if this was some sort of Shield vacation home or something I made my way up the front steps. I was reaching for the doorbell when the front door opened, revealing Clint standing there with a smile.

“That wasn’t a cloak,” He said with a smirk, standing to the side to let me walk in.

“No, they weren’t as good as I was hoping for,” I admitted with a shrug and a smile as I turned to look at the interior. “More of a temporary... thing...”

The inside of the house looked just as normal as the outside had. Pictures were hung on the wall, many of them with Clint in them, one or two of them even had Natasha. There were shoes stacked by the door, jackets hung up on a coat rack. Further in I could see a living room, a set of stairs leading to the second floor and... toys strewn across the floor.

“What...”

Before I could answer, the sound of bare feet on the hardwood floor reached me as two kids ran through the hallway, a young girl no older than five chasing a young boy, probably around seven or eight.

“Hey you two, slow down!” Clint called out as they ran past, shaking his head when they didn’t listen.

“Those are...?”

“My kids, Lila and Cooper.” He said, his smile turning into a smirk. “Looks like you can be surprised after all.”

“Uh... Yeah. Seems like it.” I said, still a bit stunned.

“Fury helped me set this up, off the books.” He explained, leading me through the living room. “Sorry Nat didn’t warn you…”

“What and ruin the surprise?” Natasha finished with a smile, a genuine one that made me smile in return.

The red headed super spy was dressed in casual clothes, a normal dark blue blouse and jeans. She was standing next to the kitchen table, a handful of plates in her hands. She quickly finished setting the table. Before she could say anything else another woman stepped into the kitchen, the two kids following behind her.

“Wash up and sit down at the table. And Cooper, thank Auntie Nat for doing your job for you.”

The kids moved past their mom and into the kitchen, the young boy saying a quick thank you to Natasha before joining his sister at the sink, washing their hands. The woman stepped closer and stopped in front of me, a big smile on her face.

“You must be Maker. Clint and Natasha have quite a bit to say about you.” The woman said. “I’m Laura, Clint’s wife. I’m glad you could make it.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” I said with a smile, peeking at the two Shield agents. “I hope they have been good things.”

“Well considering what you did for Shield and for Nat, yeah pretty much all good things,” she said, giving me a smile that fully reached her eyes. “I hope you like messy food, Clint has been slow cooking ribs all day.”

“Yeah, yeah, that actually sounds good,” I said before apologizing. “Sorry, I’m still a bit shocked. Honestly I thought I was on my way to a Shield safe house or a sponsored vacation home, not Clint’s actual family home.”

As I talked I reached up and carded off my jacket and my armor, leaving me in basic clothes.

“Woah, I think that’s the first time I’ve seen you without some sort of armor Maker,” Clint said.

“Well you guys are clearly trusting me with something big. It’s only fair that I give some trust in return,” I said before reaching up and putting my fingers on my nose, giving my mask of many faces a tug, pulling it off for the first time in weeks. “And please, call me Carson.”

The group seemed shocked for a moment with the reveal of my light brown hair, hazel-green eyes and fair complexion. Clint and Laura seemed stuck on their surprise, while

Natasha studied my face. After a moment she smiled, a real genuine smile that made me feel warm and welcome.

“Alright everyone, sit down and get settled,” Laura said when she finally recovered, herding her kids.

We settled down around the table, Clint getting the ribs out and putting them on the counter nearby to cool while Laura put a large bowl of salad, which we passed around as everyone took a bit for themselves. The conversation was light, with the kids asking questions about who I was, though they accepted that I worked with their father and Auntie Nat pretty easily. I was extremely tempted to tease Natasha about that title but the way her face lit up every time they said it kept me from trying. Instead I listened and talked, asking questions about their schools and their hobbies.

Eventually the first course was done and Clint carried the ribs to the table and Laura brought over a pot full of corn, placing them both on folded towels. Everyone passed their plates around, each person getting a chunk of BBQ sauce slathered ribs and a corn on the cob. I buttered and took a bite of the corn first, getting a few wide eyed looks.

“... What?” I asked, worried that I had missed something.

“Those are way too hot. How are you not burning yourself?” Laura asked.

“Oh... I’m heat resistant now I guess,” I said with a shrug, looking sheepish. “I didn’t even realize it was that hot.”

“That... is the most useful thing I think you have ever done,” Clint said, getting an eye roll from Natasha. “You’ll never have to worry about burning the roof of your mouth again!”

“I didn’t really have to worry about that before either,” I pointed out, thumbing the chain of my healing necklace.

“Dang... that’s really useful.”

As we ate, we continued to talk. Apparently, once upon a time Laura had worked for Shield as well, though she didn’t seem to be keen to talk about it. After getting a subtle head shake from Natasha I quickly changed the subject.

“This place is beautiful.” I said, looking around the kitchen. “It feels like a real home. Stark’s place feels so sterile and orderly, save his workshop, it’s like they live in a lab.”

“Thank you Carson. It’s hard to keep up with it with Clint gone so much but we manage,” Laura replied with a smile. “It always just looks a bit messy to me honestly.”

“Like I said, it feels like a proper home.”

“You're still hanging out with Tony Stark?” Clint asked after a short pause.

“Yeah. Once you get past all of his issues he isn't that bad.”

“I worked under cover for him for a week,” Natasha said, “He is very clearly a narcissist.”

“Ehh, maybe. Probably,” I said, gesturing in a kind of sort of way. “I think his issues are a coping mechanism. Gaining control by putting everyone else on edge, that sort of thing. If anything he is a control freak. Least that's my guess, you would have more experience with that sort of thing than me.”

“Well either way, don't pick up any bad habits from him please,” She said. “He is tolerable because he seems to genuinely want to help, but I'd rather you not be just tolerable.”

I couldn't help but chuckle and nod, agreeing to not pick up any bad habits from him. Clint brought up his plans for renovating the house and I nodded along, agreeing that the sunroom could use a reflooring, despite the fact that I didn't even know where the sunroom was.

Eventually we finished eating and started cleaning up from dinner. When we were done with that, the kids eagerly led us out the back door to a fire pit. We sat around the fire for another hour before the kids started drifting to sleep. They didn't want to go, but soon Clint and Laura had them making their way back inside, heading to bed. This left Natasha and I alone, on opposite sides of the fire.

“Hey. I didn't want to ask while everyone was around, but how are you feeling?” I asked, Natasha giving me a small smile

“I feel amazing. Whole.” She said, the second part quietly, her eyes focused on the fire.

“I'm very happy for you Natasha, seriously.”

“Nat,” She said, looking up. “Call me Nat.”

“Alright, Nat,” I responded with a smile, receiving one in return.

A few minutes later Clint and Laura came back from their parental duties, the latter carrying a few blankets with them. She handed one to Natasha, who happily took it. She offered one to me but I waved it away, the mother setting it down on the chair next to me before settling into a longer couch-like seat beside Clint, snuggling against him and covering herself in the blanket.

“Thank you for inviting me to dinner, and into your home.” I said to the two parents. “I was a bit shocked at the beginning but dinner was great. I actually brought dessert but it’s a Tiramisu with alcohol in it. I have no idea what your policy on that would be and I thought bringing up a desert they might not be able to have would be a bad idea.”

As I mentioned the dessert I pulled out a card and pushed out the contents onto a table. A medium sized pastry box appeared, wrapped up in twine.

“Oh you didn’t have to do that, but thank you.” Laura said, starting to stand before Clint stopped her and headed inside. “And good choice. I believe it’s one of Natasha’s favorites.”

“Wait, really?” I asked, looking at the blanket wrapped spy, who was now sitting up and looking intrigued, nodding in confirmation.

Clint came back out with some plates and forks, as well as a serving utensil. I cut the twine holding the box shut and the archer started cutting and serving generous slices of the decadent dessert. Natasha, upon taking the first bite let out a sound of pure enjoyment, actually blushing when I looked up at her.

“Carson, this is amazing.” Laura said after trying it. “Where did you get this?”

“A small shop in Italy.” I said with a shrug. “They make amazing cannolis but I felt like mixing it up.”

Laura looked surprised, stopping with a fork full of dessert halfway to her mouth, while Clint shook his head and Natasha rolled her eyes. I simply took another bite, leaning back in the chair.

“I shouldn’t ask, but did you fly all the way to Italy?” Laura asked. “Clint mentioned you can fly pretty fast but that seems ridiculous.”

“Not exactly...” I said, taking a peek at Natasha who shrugged. “I can teleport between a bunch of places. Technically it’s not teleporting but-

“Bullshit, there is no way you can... Seriously?” Clint asked, sitting up with wide eyes.

“Yeah, Natasha experienced it the other day,” I admitted. “I kind of expected her to reveal that one already.”

“It didn’t seem important.” Natasha said casually, taking another bite of her dessert, getting a snort out of Laura.

We continued to talk about my teleportation, vaguely describing how it worked before Laura asked about my flying. Eventually, as we were talking about some of the other things I had created, a thought occurred to me.

“Listen, very recently I developed something for locational protection. I call it a wardstone and it... Well it’s intent based protection in a large bubble centered around the stone. It pairs really well with another creation, a shield generator and-”

“You made shields?” Clint asked, now very interested. “Like in Star Wars?”

“Vaguely, yeah. I can tie it to a wardstone and provide a lot of smart protections for a building, location... or a home.”

“And you are offering to put one of these here?” Clint asked, his eyes wide. “How obvious would it be?”

“Completely hidden until it was needed,” I explained. “The wardstone essentially is inactive until it senses someone entering its field who has nasty intentions and knocks them out. Anyone who has poor intentions but doesn’t plan on actual violence simply notifies you. That way you don’t have to explain anything weird if it’s just a simple trespasser or something. If the wardstone senses an attack, like someone shooting at the house, it will deploy the shield. It works quick enough to stop a bullet as long as your wardstone goes out far enough.”

“That... That sounds incredible. Have you tested it?” Laura asked both of the home owners sitting up straight.

“Kinda?” I responded sheepishly. “The shield works for sure, it stands up to everything I can throw at it. The intent stuff is much harder to test because it can recognize that you don’t actually mean it. In order for it to trigger you have to seriously want to or plan to harm someone who is on the wardstones list of people it’s meant to protect. Neither of us really wanted to test that aspect out, though I would probably volunteer if that was what ended up holding you back.”

Clint and Laura shared a long look before Clint nodded and looked back at me.

“We would have to talk about it,” He said before continuing. “I would like to see it in action as well.”

“Alright, I’ll have to figure out a way to demonstrate it.” I said with a smile and a shrug. “Beyond that I would also like to offer some more enhancements to you and Natasha and maybe some healing rings for your family.”

“We can’t really afford anything like that Carson,” Laura admitted. “Clint mentioned how much you charged and-”

“Not a single cent.” I said, waving her off. “I don’t charge friends and after tonight you absolutely belong in that category.”

“Carson... That’s a lot. You’re willing to just...”

“Of course!” I said confidently, looking around at the two parents, at Natasha and the house behind them. “Look, I can’t go around the world, making sure everyone on the planet is safe. But I can absolutely do that with the people I know. If I can offer any help, like keeping your kids healthy and making sure you come home to them, how could I not? And besides, the steep price Shield pays for equipment is mostly due to what it can do, not how much it actually costs to make.”

“Carson... Thank you for your offer.” Clint said sincerely after a moment. I could see Laura’s eyes watering slightly. “We will talk about it and get back to you very soon.”

“Take your time. When you’re done figuring it out, give me a call. Just dial ‘maker’ on any phone and it will put you through to me,” I explained, before chuckling. “If you really want to repay me you can just invite me to more dinners like this, this has been a lot of fun. Oh and maybe invite Ema as well next time.”

They both promised that I was always welcome in their home, before promising again to let me know their decision soon. After that the conversation drifted a bit, the weighty seriousness slowly dissipating. Eventually, when the fire burned mostly out and it was a little past one AM the Bartons both declared it was time for them to sleep, Natasha agreeing since the little ones were just as likely to wake her up as they were their parents.

We said our goodbyes, Natasha walking me through the house and back to the front porch. I started to step down the stairs before Natasha caught my elbow. I turned only to find myself enveloped in a hug.

“Thank you.” She said, “They are my only family, and you come in and offer to keep them safe, really safe. Thank you.”

I was shocked for just a moment before I slowly wrapped Nat in my own hug.

“I’m happy to keep the people you care about safe, Nat,” I said, pulling back and smiling, meeting the redhead’s eyes. “Do me a favor and think about what I can do to make you safer too. There isn’t much I can’t do these days, especially on a small scale, so the sky’s the limit.”

“I will. I’ll make sure they think about your offer as well,” She said with a small nod, stepping back and letting me step down the stairs.

“Thanks. I’ll see you around?”

She nodded and turned back to the door, giving me a look as she shut the door and left me in the dark. I stared at the door for a moment before traveling home.