

Just as before, it was hard to fight back my smiles the next day. I was having a lot of fun spending time with Natasha, and from what I could tell the feeling was mutual. I did my best to temper my expectations, but I was feeling hopeful. I just hoped she didn't get too annoyed about me keeping the research base from her.

I was happy that our dates seemed to be going well, or at least that the plans had been fun and interesting. Nothing sucked quite like a dud date after all. Her crashing on the racetrack had been startling for her, but she had quickly gotten over it. She refused to let it keep her down for longer than it took for her to catch her breath. It had been shocking to see just how fast she was comfortable pushing the motorcycle once we had moved on to them.

We had already agreed to a third date, but Natasha had insisted that it was her turn to plan it out, assuring me that even if she couldn't do everything I could that she was perfectly capable of keeping up our streak of starting without with a normal date and ending with something strange and out there. I happily agreed, and was already wondering what she had in mind.

The next few days were spent waiting for the research group conference and keeping myself busy around the warehouse. I worked on a few side projects, including a few of my smaller ideas to help people that was as disconnected as possible from the Conceptual Deck, a difficult task when I was using the Deck to make everything. I also kept the gradual deployment of the lunar shield system under observation, checking up on the control panel frequently to make sure the placement of the shield system was on track.

When the satellite system was finally finished, Ema and I spent some time testing it. The first activation was a little tense, but went completely as planned, the satellites projecting an energy barrier completely around the moon. Luckily, Ema had pointed out that a glowing dome of energy suddenly encircling the moon probably wouldn't go unnoticed for very long, so I added in a control function for what the shield looked like, the Wakandan cloaking tech sliding in perfectly into place. The result was a shield that could look however I wanted, whether it was see-through or polka dotted.

After the initial testing went well, Ema and I barraged the far side of the moon with the *Void Skipper*, hammering it with its load out, all while keeping a close eye on the shields metrics. At a full, constant barrage, intermittently boosted by the Tesseract, the shield dropped at a hilariously slow rate. Even that became pointless, as with a few taps on the satellite controls the system began to spin, shifting around the moon to allow the load to be even further spread around the system. Between that ability, and the fact that the Earth's system would be massively over saturated by satellites meant that I was pretty confident in the new systems.

Whoever came knocking on our door was going to get a pretty big surprise when their weapons did nothing against the shield.

To bring the lunar system to the same general levels of strength as the eventual Earth system, I programmed a few UCMs to double the amount of satellites around the moon. Eventually I would come up with a system to auto deploy replacements if a satellite was damaged or overloaded, but for now I was focused on just getting it up and running.

The Earth system was getting closer and closer to being a reality, as the WSC insisted that their contribution to the satellite was almost complete. It was obvious they were worried I was getting impatient because they invited me to come to check out their progress for myself. The satellite was a simple cylinder with a flared bottom that, measured about five feet tall and four feet wide around the at its widest. It didn't look like anything special, but I took a few samples of the materials and parts they were using and they did hold a sort of planned failure concept, similar to what I could feel from specific parts that existed around crumple zones in cars.

I didn't stay long after that, but I was assured they would be done in the next week. They also let me keep some of the materials, which I would probably end up using to make sure the satellites kept the "ability" to break upon impact, even as I added and mixed things in with them.

When the press conference and reveal event finally came around, I was excited and eager to get started. The Earth defense fleet and the shield system were both firmly in the WSC court, which meant I was free enough to take care of everything the research teams would need.

On the day of the event, I landed on Tony's personal landing balcony outside his suite in Stark Tower. I had wanted Ema to join me but she had insisted on monitoring security from the research base. Tony greeted us by doors into his personal apartment, already dressed in a suit that simultaneously looked like it was worth about the same as a decent car, but also on the causal end of what was acceptable for this kind of event. Pepper, who was waiting with him, was dressed much more professionally.

"Please tell me you have a change of clothes?" She asked as she looked at my very casual outfit.

"Nope!" I said with a grin, before shifting my outfit into a burgundy suit, tie, and slacks, with a black undershirt and black dress shoes. "How's this?"

For a long moment, Pepper was silent, looking me up and down before shaking her head.

"Make it a little brighter," She said, nodding when I changed the color. "Perfect. And in case you're curious, my birthday is February tenth."

“I wouldn't make you wait if you wanted one, Pepper, but Ema curses me for giving her one” I responded with a chagrined shrug. “She claims that it ruins shopping for her, which was something she enjoyed doing before I gave it to her.”

We continued to make small talk for a while, with Pepper explaining what the schedule for the event was. When she mentioned that I should leave any issues to security, unless it was a serious, dangerous threat, I brought up Natasha.

“About that. I invited Natasha as my plus one, and she-”

“Natasha? Superspy, Black Widow, Shield cronie Natasha?” Tony asked, his eyes wide. “Why the hell would you do that?”

“We've gone on a few dates and-”

“Really? Are you sure-”

“Yes Tony, don't forget I can tell when people are lying.” I pointed out, the older man nodding reluctantly.

“I'll let security know, not that we were going to keep her out. Someone will guide her in when she shows up.” Pepper said with a smile, giving Tony a look. “It's not like we didn't know Shield would be here. We invited people from the WSC after all.”

We headed down to the primary terminal, which was done up with decorations and tables, with catering and serving staff running around making the final preparations. At the moment the majority of the room was clear, but at some point, most of the space would be taken up with chairs, which for now were folded and stored somewhere else. There was a raised temporary platform, which was backed by a large arch, which for the most part looked decorative, though it was anything but. It was a larger version of the portal doorways, and once activated would connect to a duplicate located in the research base park.

Since this was a press event, Pepper had suggested that stepping out into a dome, with space and the surface of the moon easily visible, would make a much bigger statement than appearing inside the normal security checkpoints. Since I had long since stopped worrying about wasting resources, I made a portal that was big enough for an entire crowd to fit through. What's more, about halfway through building it I realized how useful it might be to have access to a large portal connecting the Earth to the moon, so I made it collapsable and stuck several versions of the in secure storage, easily accessible on the moon, but only accessible to several trustworthy people on Earth.

Not long after Pepper finished explaining the general schedule for the event, people started to trickle in. I recognized more people than I thought I would, with several of the scientists I helped recruit mingling around.

There were also more than a few dozen people representing magazines, newspapers, and news sites, all of them wearing press badges. There were also a few people I recognized from the WSC, as well as all branches of the US military. Councilwoman Hartford gave me a nod in acknowledgment when our eyes met, and Director Fury gave me a glare as if he already knew the bomb we were about to drop.

I mingled as best I could, sharing the excitement with those who knew what was going on and doing my best to avoid those who clearly wanted to know more. Luckily the press had no idea who I was, which meant they more or less left me alone. I did spend a while talking to Bill Foster, Jane Foster, and Thor, who was currently dressed in normal earth clothes. The two scientists talked rather animatedly about their areas of expertise while Thor and I tried to keep up. Thor, at least, could occasionally identify some of the phenomena that they were discussing, though his responses usually had something to do with magic of some kind. Luckily Bill had taken the existence of magic in stride, explaining that after experiencing Pym Particles and what they did to the generally accepted laws of physics, the existence of magic wasn't that large of a leap.

"It's just another avenue of investigation," He said excitedly. "Who knows what magic will say about the forces and phenomena we have been observing but couldn't explain? I'm very interested in finding out if Pym Particles have a magic equivalent. Perhaps they are a form magic themselves, and Hank Pym stumbled on them by accident."

"Pym Particle, what is this?" Thor asked, taking a sip from the mug of beer a server had handed him.

"It's a subatomic particle, that interacts with mass and density," Jane explained. "But their creator is infamous in the science community for refusing to share his findings."

"I believe I remember my mother casting a spell that turned a large boulder into a small stone." The Asgardian Prince said, thinking deeply. "It had been mysteriously placed in her garden by an unknown, and probably handsome troublemaker, showing off feats of strength to the pretty gardener."

Jane rolled her eyes and slapped Thor's stomach, the divine alien laughing loudly. Bill looked a little confused before finally realizing what Thor had been implying. The older scientist looked noticeably healthier and less stressed, probably because of his ward's new lease on life. Ava, who had refused to even consider joining us for the event, not that I blamed her, had decided to stay back for now, and planned to join Bill on the moon in a few weeks. She was already coming to terms with the likely hood that Hydra had been the one to kidnap and train her. She had eagerly agreed to stick around when I promised to poke and prod Shield until they admitted the truth.

As I walked around, shook hands, and listened to people try and guess what all of this was about, I kept my eyes peeled for Natasha. She had assured me she wasn't scheduled to go on any missions and had even guessed that the reason for that was that Fury wanted her to go to the event anyway. I was tempted to ask Fury if he knew where she was but was hesitant to reveal our growing closeness without first asking how much she had already revealed.

Eventually, the food and tables were cleared and the chairs were brought out. I was tempted to just hang out with the rest of the people in the audience, but I didn't want to face the wrath of Pepper. Instead, I joined her on the stage, standing beside Tony. It didn't take long for everyone to take their seats and quiet down after that. As Pepper stood up to the podium, I spotted several cameras already set up, no doubt broadcasting us out. I couldn't help but internally lament the complete and utter loss of any sort of anonymity. I was on stage with Tony Stark, I wouldn't be surprised if the people behind the cameras had already figured out who I was.

Pepper spoke after a moment, going through a short introduction speech. She spoke about the dedication that Stark Industries had to humanitarian efforts, in making the world a better place. She talked about their efforts in green energy, as well as supporting several nonprofit organizations, before passing the podium off to Tony after mentioning that Stark Industries was happy to support the most ambitious and advanced humanitarian project yet. Tony waved as a camera snapped his picture, trading spot with Pepper confidently.

"Hello! How are you, good to see you. Janet, nice to see you're still working for CNN, Bob, I like the new suit," He said, pointing out to people in the crowd. "The Stark name has been connected to a lot of stuff over the last three decades. Not all of it has been nice, but it has always been on the cutting edge. My father, in his early years, saw technology as a way to fix the world's problems. Later, as he grew cynical with age, he saw it as a means to solidify, and sometimes force peace. He was determined to supply the right people with the biggest and shiniest sticks he could."

Everyone was listening closely as Tony spoke, the usually cocky and flippant billionaire catching everyone's attention. I was pretty sure this was the nicest thing Tony had said about his father in a long time.

"More recently, I have tried to steer Stark Industries to his original vision. Technology for the future. With the help of Stark Industries' wonderful CEO, that goal has been relatively successful," The billionaire hero said, gesturing back to Pepper before continuing. "But there has always been a gap. There is only so much a single company, even one as impressive as Stark Industries, can achieve."

Tony paused for a moment, letting his words sink in before continuing.

"That is why I am happy to announce a new place where humanity can develop, research, and create the technology and science of the future. With support from myself, Stark

Industries, and my good friend Maker, a creator on par with myself, we have created a place where the best minds that we have, from every walk of life and nationality, can come together and stretch the limits of human development. Once upon a time, the sky was the limit! But now, together, we will reach for the stars!"

I subtly flicked out a card, pushing out a small controller and activating it with a single button press. The portal behind Pepper and I hummed, before the lines inset around the frame glowed. With a flash of orange energy the portal opened.

"I happily introduce the Space Technology And Research Station, a lunar base focused on research in all fields, done by the greatest minds of humanity. Here we will forge a better tomorrow, among the S.T.A.R.S.!"

The audience immediately roiled with questions, cameras flashing near constantly, as Tony held his arms out. I could see the shocked expressions of the people in the audience, though I did see Nick Fury, looking at me with his patented glare. I couldn't help but give him a wave and a smile.