

The WSC put together crews for the Earth Defence Fleet surprisingly quickly. It was a rather daunting task that I had assumed would take several months to complete, but about a week after the construction of the first battle group was finished, they had crews for each of the ships ready. The crew was much smaller than any water-bound ship would be because much of the ship's functions would be automated, but there were still quite a few roles to fill.

The process of activating the battle group started with me putting a series of portal doorways, identical to the system used at S.T.A.R.S, down in a secure section of the Triskelion. They had renovated a set of offices, moving whatever had been located there to a satellite facility. They then turned the cleared space into the central hub for the Earth Defense Fleet deployment and monitoring.

Each of the portal doors led to a different yet-to-be-named ship. When the next battle group was done, I would link a set of doors for them as well. I also put down the monitoring equipment for each ship in the same general area before handing over the kill switch to Director Fury. It was bound to him and also included a safety feature that prevented him from activating it if he was being mentally influenced or forced to through coercion. I had my own switch that was similarly bound and locked.

After doing my part to set up the Earth Defense Fleet Command, including setting up a holoprojector map of the solar system that would track the fleets real-time, and would eventually allow me to hook up an early warning sensor field so that they could monitor a considerable amount of space around the planet, I was introduced to the first crew.

It was a team of various ethnicities and origins, mainly from Shield, but also several other militaries, including the US Navy and Airforce. I could only imagine the backroom dealings that worked that out, and I was delighted I hadn't been involved.

I spent three days training the crew, running them through drills, and helping them get to know the ship before leaving them to train on their own. When the next battle group was finished, the original crews split in two, so they wouldn't have to rely on me for training.

I was happy to see that they included people who previously couldn't serve or fly due to things like injuries, age, and vision issues, especially for the starfighter pilots. Not only was it less critical for them to be near perfect because the starfighters were all remote piloted and, once destroyed, would be automatically replaced for no cost, but the ships all had access to a caduceus droid-staffed medical room. Quite a few of the crews went in with medical issues and left perfectly healthy.

While the crews of the battle groups were getting used to their new roles, I started work on the Reactionary Fleet Base on the dark side of the Moon. While the final structures were large, they weren't anything complicated. I created a series of massive berths for each ship, each with a portal frame along the bottom. A control system located in a central building could select a destination, and the vessel would fall or fly downwards and appear in the designated

area. They could appear anywhere in the general solar system, save the off-limits sphere around Earth, giving the Reactionary Fleet incredible flexibility.

Around the time that the Reactionary Fleet started construction, meaning that all four of the patrol fleets were complete and out patrolling, I completed construction of the final version Earth shield system satellite. They had completed their contribution to the system a week and a half prior, and I had worked out several versions that the WSC then had to test extensively.

I was able to isolate the concept of planned failure from the satellite they created, meaning that I could make it as strong as I wanted. At this point, the satellites were as near to indestructible as I could get in a Marvel universe where adamantium didn't seem to exist. However, they would still fall apart and disintegrate from the heat of reentry if knocked out of orbit. Shield, of course, tested this a few dozen times by dropping them from low earth orbit before they were finally satisfied. They also had a self-destruct trigger that would reduce them to harmless chunks if that somehow didn't work.

By the time I was done, I had worked an incredible amount of resources and iterations to the final product, and it showed. It was now a named card. Each individual satellite was an "Atlas Shield System Satellite."

A portion of the Triskelion was quickly set aside as a monitoring station for the shield system, which was where I set up their monitoring and control system. It was layered with safeties and locks that would prevent it from being accessed and used nefariously. It could also be entirely overridden by my terminal and would notify me secretly if anything was changed, which I did not tell them.

After the monitoring station was set up, I set up their deployment. I had offered to do it from the roof of the Triskelion, as the drones would be produced and immediately turn invisible, but they had adamantly refused. Instead, I was sent to a high-security Shield facility in the midwest of America, where I set up thirty LPMs to pump out the satellites, which would fly up into the sky, fully cloaked, where they would link up to the controls systems and slide into their designated locations. It took a while, as these satellites were much more complicated and conceptually dense than the ones protecting the Moon, but the system was automated, so I could just leave it running while working on other things.

Three weeks after it started, deployment was finished with a whopping six hundred satellites, just around double what was required. They worked together to cover the entire planet in an invisible protective shield. I then converted half of the LPMs used to deploy the Atlas Shield System to automatically replenish that number should any be destroyed.

I wasn't just working on the large defense projects during that time either. I was also dedicating a significant portion of my time to the requests coming from the scientists at S.T.A.R.S.

Betty was trying to produce a series of genetically engineered crops that could provide a significant amount of food, as well as survive and even thrive in specific extreme environments. The usual problem with this process was time. Each attempt had to be grown, and while you could do it in iterations and stages, you still had to wait to see the results of your experiment.

I developed a series of planter spaces that would speed up the growth of a plant by an adjustable rate, all the way up to around ninety-five percent. Now she could grow a plant that usually took three months to develop in a few days. It did require frequent changes in soil, but next to accelerating the growth of a living thing, that was easy. Betty was already making good progress on the first version of her plant, a fast-growing tree that would produce small, dense fruit, not unlike a fig. The fruit wasn't flavorful, but it would count for a significant amount of someone's daily nutrition.

I was just glad she understood the dangers involved with the concept, taking every step slowly and testing every aspect she could. It didn't hurt that I could also double-check her work with my universal scanner, which I was debating spreading around the facility to let other people check their work for potentially dangerous and unforeseen issues.

Bruce, Tony, and Bill Foster were working together on a group project, which in and of itself was part of a larger engineering project. Together they were trying to make a cheaper, more user-friendly, and safer version of the arc reactor while the engineering team as a whole was attempting to create the perfect vehicle. It would have to be affordable, energy efficient, rugged, long lasting, comfortable, and environmentally friendly. The last addition would be the completed civilian arc reactor.

The three super scientists were making serious headway, already having figured out how to make the arc reactor accident safe, meaning that it wouldn't spiral out of control or overcharge anything if it was damaged in an accident. Their next project was shifting it to function on a less expensive core. The engineering team was also making significant progress and were now messing with a low-cost, biodegradable rubber from the biology department to make the tires and tubing. They had plans to use bamboo fabric for the interior and had already developed an efficient and safe engine system for the arc reactor to sit in.

The current mode was a bit too expensive to be called affordable, but Tony assured me that the first step was to build the concept, then they could work down from there.

It wasn't all smooth sailing all around, though. Natasha and I had decided that while her enhancements could now keep up with my own, she wasn't going to advertise that she had them. Unfortunately, fate conspired against her, and during a mission, she was forced to reveal them to save a civilian. The WSC was very upset that they hadn't been told but had dropped it once I pointed out that who I enhanced was none of their business and that if they wanted my continued support, they would learn to mind it.

Of course, now that they did know Natasha was enhanced, they began taking advantage of it, sending her on progressively more and more dangerous missions. That in and of itself wasn't necessarily bad, but when they insisted that she start going on more missions with less downtime, she finally had enough. She left a note for Fury that she would be back when she felt like it and moved into Clint's guest room, though she spent at least half her time on the Moon with me.

I was tempted to stop working with the WSC and Shield completely, save for the EDF, but Natasha convinced me that the work I was doing and the work I could be doing soon was too important. I agreed, assuming that they didn't start pushing for more. Neither of us had to worry for very long, as three of the council members decided to retire, and both of us received an apology from Councilwoman Hartford when she and Director Fury met with Tony, Pepper, and me to discuss some of their worries about S.T.A.R.S.

Tony wasn't interested in hearing anything they had to say, so he mostly spent the meeting firing sarcastic comebacks and retorts, but Pepper and I both did our best to be amicable. Once we moved past the "how are we supposed to spy on you when you live on the moon?" issue, which was veiled behind several worries they had, they brought up several valid problems, including the fact that Shield was *supposed* to have unilateral access to research facilities studying potentially dangerous subjects to make sure everything was being properly handled, kind of like a super science OSHA.

Technically, we could have told them to fuck off, as we were under no obligation to oblige them. However, Pepper and I both believed that as long as there was no recording equipment, or any attempt to steal our projects, we would allow Shield to go over our safety protocols and do the occasional audit on whether our facilities were following them. Tony thought we were being pushovers, but neither saw the point in causing drama or conflict when there was minimal risk involved, especially since we could monitor their intent.

Time went on, and soon almost three months had passed since the Red Room fiasco. Things had calmed down significantly, and my two major projects, the EDF and the Atlas Shield System were complete, both doing even better than I had expected. S.T.A.R.S. was already paying off, with progress being made in several promising avenues. It wouldn't be long before our first revolutionary development would be rolled out, hopefully helping the planet.

Natasha and I spent plenty of time going on dates and trying to one-up each other on crazy for the second half of each of them. She planned our third date, which ended with several halo-style drops from a quinjet, with the added challenge of playing tag. We both ended up getting competitive about how low to the ground we could wait to deploy our wings, and I ended up putting a hole through a barn roof. Technically it wasn't that crazy, considering I could fly that high with my wings, but it was an exhilarating experience.

For our fourth date, after taking Natasha to the Eiffel tower, we flew around the Moon with some of the starfighters I designed for the Command class ships for the EDF. We ended up dogfighting for a few hours, which miraculously ended with a tie, five to five.

Eventually, we called a truce because we were both running low on new ideas and because Ema pointed out we were getting kind of reckless. Our fifth date was a double date, with Clint and Laura joining us on the Moon for a picnic dinner cooked by Alfred. It was nice to just unwind, and I could tell Clint and Laura appreciated the chance to get away from the kids for the night. When they eventually went home, Natasha and I stayed a while longer on the blanket, spread out on the grey surface of the Moon. There was a bubble of breathable atmosphere around us, held in by a shield system I had put down just for this night.

We watched the clouds on Earth swirl around, the sun peaking out from behind the planet. It was incredibly peaceful, and while I knew there were plenty of challenges on the Earth before us and the space that surrounded us, I was confident that we could handle them.