

I was walking around the warehouse with a big dumb grin on my face for the majority of the following day. The date had gone well as far as I could tell, and I was already looking forward to the next one, though it had only come up as a hypothetical during the actual date. For the most part, I was working on smaller projects, things like a wire runner for Tony, a device we could use to run wires neatly through the interior of the research facility. He still hadn't gotten back to me with the larger list he mentioned, but I assumed that was because they weren't done putting it together yet, which only served to make me nervous about how long it would be.

It was about three in the afternoon when the WSC finally got in touch with me for our meeting. They requested that it take place in the actual council chambers, which were located on the highest floor of the Triskelion. I got the feeling that they very rarely actually met there in person. I had no reason to say no, after all, while I'm sure that it was an attempt to put me off center and in an intimidating environment, there wasn't much they could do to actually intimidate me. I was no longer dependent on them in any way, and there wasn't much they could possibly do to hurt me at this point, not without really shooting themselves in the foot at least.

Still, it was a pretty blatant attempt for them to throw me off, so I got back at them by demanding the meeting take place the following day, which caught Mr. Singh, the council member who contacted me, obviously off guard. He attempted to push it back a few days but I insisted, saying that I was sticking to a schedule and if they weren't going to hurry up then they wouldn't get a say. I was exaggerating, but it got the point across enough that he reluctantly agreed.

I spent the rest of the day going over what I would be saying with Ema, practicing lines, and getting ready to talk to the assembled members of the WSC. I was hoping they wouldn't try and take control of me again, but I was prepared to leave if they did. None of my plans depended completely on them, though most of them would be much easier with their help, or at least without them trying to stir shit up.

It was a pain to have so much to do but be stuck waiting for "permission" so I occupied myself by experimenting with some of my new materials and stock from Asgard, as well as putting a few more things together for the research center. I traveled down to DC with Ema at around ten in the morning, flying across the city to land in front of the Triskelion. We were met at the door by Peggy Carter.

"Hello Carson, Ema," She said with a smile. "It's good to see you again."

"Good to see you too," I responded, my armor fluttering away before my clothes shifted into a pair of black dress pants and a black blazer, a white shirt underneath. "You're my escort?"

"I am indeed, if you come this way, the council is already in session waiting for you."

With a nod and a smile, the woman led us to an elevator, Ema following behind me. I knew she had shifted to an outfit similar to mine, though hers was much more formal, her blazer buttoned up with a dark red tie.

The elevator closed behind us with a ding, heading up to the top floor. After a second or two I turned my head to Peggy.

“So, are they looking to cause a mess or work together?”

“You make them nervous Carson,” She admitted with a frown. “You make a lot of people nervous.”

“Can’t really help it,” I responded with a shrug.

“I know. The reasonable people realize that,” She explained. “They are nervous but understand. The idea of global protection is something they desperately want, but the idea of handing the keys to someone else scares them. A lot.”

“Thanks,” I nodded. “That’s basically what Ema and I had assumed, but it’s nice to confirm it.”

“You’re welcome,” She said with a soft smile, her face still serious despite it.

The door opened with another ding, and Peggy lead us down a hall to a set of double doors. Arrayed around a large circular table, with a small gap on the closest side, were fifteen individuals. I recognized some of them from the meeting before I went to Asgard, as well as Councilwoman Hartford, who it seems had returned from her own stay at Asgard at some point. Several conversations ended immediately when I stepped into the room. I could see four armed Shield agents stationed around the room, including two by the door. I immediately recognized them from the newest enhanced squad, the one I put together just before the Chitauri invasion.

“Good morning everyone,” I said with a nod, getting several in return, trying my best to project confidence without arrogance.

“Greetings Carson.” Councilwoman Hartford said, standing from her seat and gesturing to the chairs around the table. “Please, have a seat.”

I nodded and sat in one of the comfortable office chairs, noting that there were plenty of spaces around the table, but this side of the table was particularly clear. Ema sat down beside me, unbuttoning her jacket as she did.

“I want to start off this meeting by saying that the World Security Council acknowledges and commends you for the contributions you have made to protect the people of this planet.

Between the Hydra fiasco and the Chitauri invasion, you have helped keep innocent people safe. Thank you.”

Councilwoman Hartford continued, surprising me for a moment. I considered my response before finally nodding and accepting.

“Thank you. I appreciate the acknowledgment,” I said with a nod. “I would like to add that I will always come to the defense of Earth from global threats.”

Several members nodded at my statement as if they expected me to respond in that way.

“That is good to hear,” She continued, retaking her seat. “Then let's get to the meat of this meeting. Carson, if you'd like to explain your proposal?”

I smiled and nodded, leaning forward in my seat. Ema had actually called this during our discussion, that the council would try to keep the discussion as simple as possible to keep from getting caught up in the size and scope of what I was proposing.

“As the council is no doubt aware, humanity is not alone in this universe. The Chitauri, while dangerous, are not considered to be especially powerful in the grand scheme of things,” I explained. “Their danger comes from their numbers, and that they are near impossible to eradicate completely. They are considered small-time problems. There are threats out there that would wipe out humanity as easily as you exterminate a pest problem, and all just to warm their hands on our burning planet.”

“How could you know that?” Mr. Yen, who was one of the council members I recognized from the meeting before I left for Asgard. “I'm not denying that there are threats out there, but you make it sound like you know what is out there.”

“I am unwilling to share my sources,” I responded. “But, as I'm sure you are being told by whatever agent is listening in, I am telling the truth.”

The room was silent for a long moment, but I could see the confirmation in a few of their eyes. Ema and I had expected them to get as much use of their lie-detecting rings as possible, so this was not a surprise. After a long pause, I continued.

“My proposal is broken into two parts. Part one is a fleet of ships patrolling our solar system. Each would have a crew, provided by you, who would control and fly the ships. They would be incapable of being both too close and too far from Earth, as well as being incapable of aiming their weapons at Earth. The crew would be under heavy security, designed by me and approved by you.”

“What would the capabilities of these ships be?” A council member that I didn't recognize asked.

“Absolutely broken in every way I could manage,” I explained. “They would be the absolute best I am capable of making. They would also be upgraded consistently when I improve my resources and capabilities. Make no mistake Council, I expect these ships to be utterly overpowered in every aspect. And any aspect that they fall short in will quickly be rectified. Which is exactly why they will not be permitted to leave the system, and I will maintain control over an ability to disable them.”

“Why would you restrict them like that?” Mr. Signh asked, weaving his fingers into a tent as he leaned forward. “I understand the desire to provide defenses, but why restrict them from fighting in other places? They could stop threats before they happened, supply support to our allies, go on humanitarian missions.”

“Because, the first step down the slope is always on purpose,” I answered cleanly. “The slide happens three or four steps after that. This fleet will be nothing but a way to protect Earth from outside threats, I will not let good intentions slowly shift it into an unstoppable weapon. When humanity builds its own fleet with its own know-how, you can send them to do whatever dirty work you might need.”

Several members of the council looked ready to push the subject further, but Ms. Hartford cut them off by speaking up.

“And what about the second part?” She asked, getting a few looks in the process. “What would that involve?”

“I want to cover the entire planet in a massive energy shield,” I answered, noting Ms. Hartford's cooperation. It seemed like I had an ally. “This would utilize a massive network of satellites projecting an extremely powerful planetary shield. From what I understand, this has never actually been done before. According to King Odin, even the Asgardians haven't figured out how to put together a full planetary shield.”

“And what role would the WSC play in this project?” Mr. Yen asked. “And how many satellites would this take?”

“I know I can make a satellite that perfectly orbits the Earth, and I know I can make a shield generator powerful enough to hold off incredible amounts of energy. The problem is getting that system to play nicely with current and future satellites,” I explained, leaning back in my chair. “I know the basics, but I don't have access to the raw data or the experience, nor do I have the influence to warn NASA about the invisible satellite. As to how many, I would like to have about twice as necessary in case some of them somehow get taken out. Unfortunately, I won't know how far I can push my shield systems until I make the first satellite, so it could be anywhere from a hundred to three hundred. Maybe more.”

“And how would we launch all of these? Do you have any idea how expensive it is to launch a single satellite, never mind three hundred of them?”

Most of the council immediately focused on the member who brought up this point, most of them giving them a disappointed questioning look, as if wondering how exactly they had messed up so badly.

“You mean besides the *Void Skipper*? The spaceship that I have?” I asked, looking skeptically at the man. “At this point, I could probably just card them and fly up there, dropping them off myself.”

“So you would help deploy them, but who would control them?” Mr. Yen asked.

“We would have joint control. I can tie all of them to a singular console and duplicate that console, one for me and one for you. I’m sure we could work in a way that it takes both consoles permission to destroy the array, or shift it in any large way, kinda like a two-key system for nuclear weapons.”

“And what reassurances do we have that you won’t turn these satellites into your own personal weapon platforms?” Asked the same councilman who has asked how I would deploy the planetary shield system.

“Beyond a promise that I won’t?” I asked. “The thruster system I plan on fitting them with will keep them stable, and I planned on working in concepts that will help it break up in the atmosphere were to fall from orbit, but still remain strong enough to absorb impacts.”

“That does nothing to assure us you won’t weaponize them,” He repeated, tapping his finger on the table. “For that matter, what is to keep you from taking control of the fleet and using it to threaten the world?”

As he talked, the older gentleman stood and put both hands on the table, most likely trying to cut a more imposing figure. Considering his age and the fact that he wasn’t a conceptually enhanced super soldier wearing rapid-deployment armor that made him stronger than Thor, it failed quite severely.

“I put a counter-proposal to the council, that we demand Carson Walsh surrender his deck of cards so that the World Security Council can watch over them and make sure they are being put to good use, and not in the hands of some loose cannon *boy* with delusions of grandeur.”

The room was silent, for a long moment. Most of the council members kept their expressions clear, though a slight wave of nervousness leaked through a quite few poker faces. I stared at the standing man, not wavering for a moment.

"I will say this clearly so that there is no confusion in the future," I said, still staring down the aggressive councilman. "I will *never* surrender the Conceptual Deck. Besides, it doesn't work like that in the first place. The Deck is attached to *my soul*, it will not work for anyone else and if I die, the Deck would disappear forever."

The man rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to retort. It was obvious from his body language that he thought I was full of shit, and that he wasn't about to give up. Instead of letting him rant any further, I held up my hand. The man's face went red, about to open his mouth to yell when I cut him off.

"Does the council at large agree with this man?" I asked, looking around the room. "Because let me tell you right now. I am making an offer, a way for the WSC to stay in the loop and work with me in defense of the planet. I'm willing to work with you and your people to make these projects as effective as possible, because when it comes down to it your organization has the experience I want. But I am not willing to compromise myself or the project to assuage your egos or your hurt feelings that the big bad WSC doesn't control me. If you agree with this man, then tell me now, because I will save all of us time and possibly violence by just leaving."

The man was all but shaking in rage, either because I had shot down his demands with no hesitation, or because I called him out in such a way, I couldn't tell. After a moment or two, he managed to work his way through the anger and respond.

"Listen here you-

"Councilman Rockwell that is enough!" Councilwoman Hartford said, cutting him off, emphasizing her words by slapping her hand on the table. "The council will not let you cost us any chance to influence this project!"

Most of the other members nodded in agreement, though not everyone seemed to agree completely. At least a few of the members seemed to be agreeing simply to distance themselves from Mr. Rockwell.

"And you, Carson, The council has already preliminarily agreed to your first proposal of creating an Earth Defense Fleet," Councilwoman Hartford continued, now looking at me. "The global shield has yet to be discussed or voted on simply because we did not have enough information on how you would implement it."

"I understand," I said with a nod, leaning back in my chair. "And let me be clear, I do appreciate how... hard to swallow some of this stuff is. To suddenly have to deal with some of the stuff I'm making... I'm not exactly jealous. I am more than willing to discuss and talk about what exactly these projects entail, and how much oversight we would *share*."

“That is what we are looking for,” Ms. Hartford said. “We recognize that the equipment you make would be seriously problematic in the wrong hands, and we respect the desire to keep access to them as restricted as possible to keep that from happening.”

“Good, I’m glad we have established that,” I said with a nod. “How about we move on then? We can discuss the particulars of a shield system, and what your worries are. I am more than willing to shift and add features to the design if it makes you, and the eventual public feel safer, as long as it doesn’t decrease effectiveness.”

Ema and I shared a look after a moment, councilwomen Hartford starting to ask a few more questions, reading from a list I had seen her writing. This was going to take a while, I could already tell.