

I ate a late breakfast the next morning on the observation platform, with the perfect view of the slowly forming yet to be named spaceship. It was clearly recognizable at this point, with the main infrastructure in place, held up by thick scaffolding. I was joined by Tony, and surprisingly Pepper, who needed proof of what Tony and I were doing after Tony let slip the changes we wanted to make to Stark Towers design. She had spent almost a half an hour staring, wordlessly, at the stars, Earth and the half way constructed ship. Eventually she calmed down however and was able to talk relatively clearly.

"I-I knew you said that you were living on the Moon... But I hadn't really believed it until now," She admitted, taking a sip of her mimosa. "And you're sure it's safe?"

"As sure as we can be," Tony said, responding before I could. "It's way over engineered, and we are using materials that Maker designs himself, so it's basically cheating."

"My personal buildings, which are this one and my warehouse, their exterior shells are a few inches thick, and I'm pretty sure that they are strong enough to withstand a lot," I continued. "The... We still haven't come up with a name."

"Just call Moon base."

"The Moon base's outer shell is over foot thick, and can deploy another two feet of armor," I explained. "We wanted it to be damn near indestructible before we even took the shields into account."

Pepper nodded and took another bite of her fancy French style omelet, precisely crafted by Alfred. Her eyes wandered up again, catching a glimpse of Earth. After a moment she looked back down at Tony and I before sighing.

"Well. being the bridge between earth and a Moon research facility would do amazing things to Stark Tech stock." She admitted, putting down her fork. "You realize adjusting the plans for the tower is going to be expensive and add on another few months to the project, right?"

"That's fine, we need all the time we can get to recruit people," I said.

"And how is that going to work?" She asked. "How are you going to pay these people?"

"Why would I pay them?" I said with a shrug. "The kind of environment Tony and I are looking to create will be paradise for these researchers. The chance to be a part of cutting edge research in a facility that provides everything for them, no matter what they might need? I think a lot of people will be scrambling to join once we go public. If it really matters to them I'll hand them a brick of gold every few months. Or whatever other metal they want."

"So how long until the building is done?" Pepper asked after a moments pause coming to term with what i had just said.

“A little over a month,” I explained. “The builders I’m using are some of the most powerful things I’ve made so far, which is why it’s taking so little time. I’m already planning on enhancing these large project builders when the ship is done.”

We continued our relatively relaxing breakfast for another hour, talking about some of the plans and who Tony and I were planning on inviting up to live on the base. Eventually we finished our food and drinks and I traveled the both of them back down to Earth, rather than force Pepper to cross the Moon’s surface in her EVA suit again. The first time had been bad enough.

After that I took some time to study the just about half finished ship up close, flying slowly around it, checking out the progress. I could visibly see the ship's inner frame being made by the large production machines, which was kind of interesting to watch. Eventually I got bored however and flew over to check up on the massive research center. The enhanced building builders had finished flattening out the area, the machines in a perfect circle around the perimeter. They had started slowly carving downward, though they had only made an inch or so of progress so far.

With my inspection done I headed back to the warehouse, where Ema was waiting for me, outside the building.

“So... vacation?” She asked, following beside me as I walked.

We passed by a building builder, a spare one that I had made to play around with, the warehouse lounge coming into view. There, sitting on one of the couches was a woman sipping a cup of tea. She was completely bald, and dressed in very elaborate yellow and orange robes. Ema took one step past me, not realizing that we were not alone before she finally stopped and followed my look, spotting the intruder.

Instantly she was on guard, her body shifting to her “armored” state, shredding the tshirt and jeans she had been wearing. Her arms elongated, sharpening into some wicked looking points. She also stepped in front of me, covering me as my own armor deployed, covering my body completely. My revolvers, and their holsters, appeared around my armored waist last, finishing off my transformation.

“Who are you?” Ema called out. “What are you doing here?”

The woman, instead of reacting to Ema’s loud call, simply put down her cup of tea. After a moment she stood and turned to look at us, a small smile on her face. She moved with a deliberateness that spoke of training and power.

“Greetings. I apologize for invading your home like this, but I assure you I mean you no harm.”

“Then who are you? And what are you doing here?” I responded.

“I am here to meet you and your partner of course.” She said, “As for who I am? My title is the Sorcerer Supreme, but my name has been lost to time, something which I have come to appreciate. Most call me the Ancient One.”

“I’ll call you-”

I put my hand on Ema’s shoulder, stopping whatever goading name she was about to say. She looked at me and I shook my head. The Ancient One in the comics was immensely powerful and firmly on the side of good. Gender bending aside, it was probably a bad idea to start a fight with her, at least not without a serious reason.

“What do you want?” I asked, stepping around Ema, my armor still very much deployed.

I was optimistic, not stupid.

“For now? To talk.” She said with the same small smile. “Perhaps I could entice you with a cup of tea?”

“Maybe another time,” I said simply as I looked at her for a moment before walking closer, stepping into the lounge area and sitting down on the couch opposite of her.

“That is fair enough. I knew coming into your home like this would put you on edge but you are a hard man to get in touch with. I couldn’t exactly knock on your front door.”

The Ancient One returned to her seat, taking another sip of tea as I watched. Ema, who was still in her dangerous looking full combat form stood behind me, ready to defend me if necessary.

“You could have called me.” I pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

“That is true.” She said with a shrug. “I suppose next time I will.”

I watched her for a moment, as she put down her tea. She looked back up at me and held my gaze, seemingly fine with the harsh look I knew Ema was giving her from behind me.

“What exactly did you want to talk about?”

“Perhaps I could start with what it is that the Sorcerer Supreme does?” She suggested and I nodded in agreement, despite knowing already.

It was probably a bad idea to make assumptions.

The Ancient one spent the next while describing her job, going over her order of the Masters of the Mystic Arts order. It was a very similar job to the later Sorcerer Supremes in the comics, which was to protect the Earth from supernatural and mystic forces. She even described some of the threats they had faced, some of which were horrifying. It was surprising to learn that this job was done by an entire order, not just by one extremely powerful sorcerer, but the general gist was the same. She was being incredibly open about their purpose, even answering several questions I had about how many practitioners of the mystic arts there were. As far as I could tell with my equipment she was being honest as well. Eventually, when she was done she took the last sip of her tea, put the mug down, which vanished and a spray of orange sparks a moment after she did.

“That... I’m glad we have a capable group of people defending the world from unseen threats,” I finally said when she was done, getting a barely noticeable smile and a nod from her. “But why all of this? Why come here and lay it all on the table like this?”

“Perhaps it is difficult for you to see, and perhaps many might not realize it yet, but you are very rapidly becoming one of the largest powerhouses on our planet.” The woman explained. “Your ability is staggeringly powerful and flexible. You have just finished a massive project, something that would be ambitious were it done on Earth, never mind the Moon. I come to you to like this out of respect for the power you could bring to bear.”

“It’s not exactly done yet, it has a long way to go. But alright, I understand your point,” I admitted, understanding that she was correct but not quite comfortable with that level of deference. “So you just came to meet the new big kid on the block?”

“Partially. But I also came to ask you a favor.”

The ancient one moved her hand, lines of orange and gold sparking out growing and stretching into a globe, which grew and changed into an easily recognizable representation of earth.

“Some of the larger threats to Earth are kept at bay by the Sanctums, three large buildings with the most powerful enchantments on Earth wrought into their frames. They project a mystic shield around the Earth, preventing outside mystical forces from interfering with humanity. Our first and highest duty is to protect and maintain these locations.”

Another glowing orange array of lines came into existence, encircling the globe, originating from three spots on the planet. I could see that they came from the general area of New York, London and Hong Kong.

“The Sanctums were built millenia ago at the hands of the first Sorcerer Supreme, founder of our order, Agamoto,” She explained, the impressive visual aid slowly fading. “It took a near unimaginable amount of magical materials to construct the Sanctums, and when the

magical enchantment was completed by Aggamoto himself, as well as several of his most powerful students, they were never the same, their powers greatly diminished. Aggamoto himself died soon after the enchantment was complete, his students following not long after.”

“So what, you want me to reinforce them?” I asked, looking skeptical. “I have something that can do that but-”

“Yes, though that is not all. Not only would I ask you to improve the Sanctums, I would like you to build four more.”

“Four more?” I asked. “Okay, I see the logic there. With my building methods I should be able to make them without any negative side effects or consequences. But why only four?”

“Seven is a very magically stable number in general, including in our own sorcerous version,” She explained. “Aggamoto had always intended there to be seven sanctums in total, but forbade anyone from continuing the project until a method that did not exact such a high price was found. The only reason he made the existing Sanctums was because they were necessary.”

“Are you sure that's the reason?” I asked. “It's not because building any more would do something bad right? Or maybe his “Price” was something else, some sort of cosmic entity punishing him for performing such grand magic?”

The Ancient One chuckled and nodded, clearly finding my question amusing.

“I applaud your caution,” She said, still smiling. “I wish my more ambitious students shared it. It is always wise to question such things when it comes to both cosmic entities and powerful sorcerers. But I have studied the plans myself, and read Agamotto’s journals. He was aware of the consequences casting the enchantment would have. His only error was over estimating his own resilience.”

“Alright. Well if it's in the name of protecting Earth I’m happy to help. I would need a scan of the Sanctums to know more, but it's probably possible. I may need to make some adjustments to my builders to be able to handle the enchantment process in general however.”

“I’m sure it is well within your capabilities,” She said confidently with a knowing smile that made me squint my eyes.

“You've been waiting for me to be capable of this, haven't you?” I asked, leaning back in my chair.

“Yes, of course. I've been keeping an eye on you since you first started working your form of magic into your creations,” She admitted easily. “Frankly it's hard not too. Your

conceptual form of magic is strange, pure and clean but without a source. You stand out quite clearly.”

“Of course. Well as long as you don't violate my privacy...?”

“Once we determined you were not an agent of some sort of entity or a sorcerer who discovered a new source of power, no. In the spirit of fair and honest collaboration I will admit to knowing your real name.”

“Of course. Well at this point I'm not exactly worried about people knowing it anyway, I've pretty much moved past that,” I said, gesturing vaguely around myself. “Doesn't mean I'm happy about it however.”

“I am aware, but I will not apologize for performing my duties,” She explained, pausing for a moment. “I can, however, attempt to make up for it. That and my necessary, but still rude entrance into your home.”

The sorceress began making another series of hand movements, more lines of orange energy glowing and circling to form an impressive array. It almost seemed to thrum and clunk into place once it was done.

“This is a spell that is mandatory for anyone who deals with mystic arts at a higher level,” She explained, holding the just short of two foot wide and slowly spinning spell array in front of herself. “It's primary use is to purge the casters' minds of outside influences and block any further attempts for a short while. It-”

“Clears out mind control!” I said excitedly, standing quickly, my armor rescinding around myself so I step closer and study the array. “I've been looking for something like that since I realized tin foil hats didn't have the right concept. Does it have any limitations?”

“It is limited to the amount of power the sorcerer has available to him, and it is focused on oneself rather than at a target,” She explained. “It is capable of clearing out hypnotic suggestions, alterations, internal illusions and a dozen other methods of influence and control. And you may have it and several copies of it.”

I looked at her before reaching out to the array. As my hand got closer to it I could feel its warmth as well as a slight vibration in the air around it. I gave the Ancient One one last look, finally pulling the array into a card when she nodded again. The array vanished into a card easily, and I flicked it between my fingers, studying its concepts.

It was a relatively complex card, but its primary concept was one of ending and blocking outside influence on the mind. It did however require an energy source, which I should have expected considering the explanation the Ancient One had just given about sorcerous magic. I

should be able to satisfy its need for an outside source of energy pretty easily though and if not I could just find a way to separate it out.

The Ancient One fed me several more of the same spell array until I was satisfied I had enough.

"I'll need some time to gather some equipment and sort through my deck," I explained, standing up and holding out my hand. "But that shouldn't take long."

"The New York Sanctum is located at 177A Bleecker Street." The Sorceress explained, reaching out to shackle my hand with a surprisingly strong grip. "We will be expecting you to arrive shortly, but there is no real rush."

Without much more explanation she stepped back and turned, holding her hand out in front of her and making a swirling motion. Suddenly the sparks started spinning around in a circle in front of her before a portal opened, a scene of some sort of pavilion on the other side. She stepped through the portal with very little ceremony, the glowing and sparking portal collapsing immediately after.

Ema and I were quiet for a long moment when it disappeared, my partner putting her hand on my shoulder and patting it gently.

"Maybe you can take a vacation after you're done with this?" She said before laughing.

"Yeah yeah. C'mon, I need to work this anti mind control into something before we go anywhere," I said, turning towards my workshop. "And don't forget you are missing out on a vacation too."

I couldn't help but smirk when she cursed behind me.