

“How?” I asked, looking between him and Natasha, who stare back with a look that was somehow intense and empty at the same time.

“Please, you think it was hard to remove her protection from mind control?” He asked, walking around Natasha, getting uncomfortably close to her. “A few threats to the right people, one you’ve actually already met and was already under my control, and well... for someone often said to be the best spy of our age, she is easy to manipulate. Always has been really. And if I can play her, what chance do you have?”

“How did you hide it? I should have noticed...”

“Ah, your lie detection? That is actually your fault,” He said with a smirk, shaking his head. “You see, when you created the means to eliminate Hydra, removed their ability to hide and start again, you made them desperate.”

A screen of some sort sparked to life a few feet from the protective barrier, showing... someone, an older man with grey-white hair and small circular glasses. He was talking, but there wasn’t any sound playing.

“When they finally realized that there was nothing that they could do, that they were doomed, they reached out to whoever would listen, handing out research, secrets, and data to anyone who could use them against Shield, or against you,” He explained, his hand now grabbing Natasha’s arm, even as she stayed silent. “Doctor Whitehall was eager to share quite a few things with me, including their research on mind manipulation, and an almost complete mind control technique they called the Faustus Method. They then hid this final attempt at vengeance by... well, you can see.”

He gestured to the screen, where the man, who was now looking angry and upset, said a few final words before putting a gun to his head and pulling the trigger. It was a gruesome display, with very little doubt that he was dead.

“Very smart I must say, they can’t reveal where they sent that data if they are dead. I’m guessing Shield didn’t tell you their suspicions...” He trailed off, his confidence grating on my nerves as he stepped forward, releasing Natasha for the first time. “They gave me all the information I could ask for, everything I needed to take the Red Room to its final form. The perfect form of mind control, so tight, so utterly secure that even your little lie detection trinkets couldn’t pick it up. They truly believe what you tell them to believe, without hesitation.”

The screen flickered again, this time showing the security footage from a random bar. A woman I vaguely recognized as one of the people I bonded a piece of lie detection equipment to. A man approached her, and they struck up a conversation.

“We tested it thoroughly to make sure, so thank you for providing so many opportunities to do so,” He said with a chuckle. “And what a crutch it has proven to be for those agents!

Suddenly they are ignoring their instincts because their ring says they aren't lying! What an opportunity!"

"You're with the Red Room?"

"I *am* the Red Room. I control it completely, it belongs to ME!" He said, proudly proclaiming his domain. "And soon, so will you. So will everything else. I have to thank you, Carson, without you allowing Shield to crush Hydra under its boot, I would never have reached this far. I was satisfied with the idea of ruling from behind the curtain, with influencing the world rather than molding it with my hands. But with how easily Hydra was eliminated, I knew I needed to dominate the world utterly in order to truly control it. And you, my anomalous maker, are the key to that."

"Even if I submit, I have friends. They will come looking for me," I pointed out, desperately trying to buy time, trying to come up with something. "Do you think your red room will be able to put a fight against Thor of Asgard? Or the entirety of Shield? My partner is-

"Oh, that's right, your partner. Shall we check in on her? Agent Belova, status report!"

The screen flickered again and Yelena's face, now wearing the same intensely blank expression as Natasha, filled the screen. She was looking into a phone, the image moving slightly.

"Target Emerald down, General Dreykov," She reported clearly. "The weapon worked precisely."

She shifted the camera, showing off some sort of glowing weapon for a split second. It was human-made, but it had the same familiar light purple glow that the Chitauri tech, and the explosive device on Natasha's face had. It was very dim, however.

The camera view continued to move, finally pointing at Ema. There was a hole in her forehead, one that drilled completely through to the other side, the back of her head blown out messily. Her eyes were still green, but they lacked their normal glow.

"The first shot to the head rendered it immobile, repeated shots showed no response," Yelena said. "I expended the charge of the weapon into its corpse. It's dead as far as I can tell."

"Another failure to lay at your feet. If you had just listened to Natasha and left it behind, Yelena wouldn't have had to eliminate it," The man, General Dreykov, gloated with a disgusting smile. "Perhaps when I have you under my control, I will have you make more of them, loyal to me."

I knew that there was no way anything powered by the Chitauri would have enough power to really penetrate Ema's exosuit, even if whatever weapon Yelena had used had

enhanced the blast, but seeing Ema like that sparked a fear in me that sent fear slithering into my mind. The shot to the head wouldn't have done anything, but the follow-up shots, if they had hit her actual body inside the suit...

"You bastard," I growled angrily, taking a step forward, Dreykov holding up the detonator to stop me. "I'm going to destroy you! You can't kill Natasha, she is the only thing stopping me from tearing you apart!"

"Oh, I am aware of the razor's edge I am walking," He responded, his hand on the small of Natasha's back. "I am risking it all, risking it all that you will do nothing as long as she is still alive at my discretion. If you move, she is dead. It will mean my death as well most likely, but she will Still. Be. DEAD!"

"I am going to make you regret this you son of a bitch!"

"You won't get the chance. Now, take off that armor," He ordered, waiting for a full fifteen seconds before shaking his head. "You are pushing your luck Maker! Follow my orders or I will kill her! If you do not this plan cannot work, which means there is no reason to keep Natasha alive!"

I stared up at him for a long moment, before hanging my head, my armor falling off my body in pieces and plates, falling to the floor and scattering. Dreykov laughed before shouting in Russian. One of the still-closed cell doors opened, revealing seven women dressed in similar armor to what Natasha used to wear. They moved silently, gathering up the bits and pieces and carrying them away, out the door that Natasha had left through. Two of them wheeled out a contraption that glowed similarly to the weapon Yelena had used on Ema. It was larger, though, and glowed brightly.

"You should be flattered, Carson, I have been pushing the resources of the Red Room to its maximum, working out this plan, including this machine. My little Natasha insisted that you have a painless way to remove your empowering tattoos locked in your Deck, but I can't have you fishing through your things, pulling who knows what out. So we will have to remove them some other way."

Some of the expressionless women brought out a chair and pushed me to sit down in it. General Dreykov ordered me to undress, explaining that he was well aware of my outfit's capabilities. When I was sitting in the chair, completely naked, they strapped me down with massive manacles, locking me in place.

"Natasha wasn't actually sure if these could hold you, but they are mostly a formality," He said, a smile on his face that made my stomach turn. "If you stand from that chair without permission I will destroy Natasha."

The women moved around, setting up the machine, it swung around, controlled by a panel on the opposite side, aiming at my durability-enhancing tattoo.

“Once that is burned off of you, we can strip you down to a normal human once again,” Dreykov bragged, once again standing unnecessarily close to Natasha, standing behind her. “And when we have removed your protection against mind control, you will join Natasha in making the Red Room the greatest power on this planet. A united planet under my rule!”

I stared at the man, coldly holding his gaze before he nodded to the woman working the machine next to me. It hummed and whined, the pitch increasing before purple-blue energy blasted my side. It was surprisingly forceful, the chair sliding a few inches before they adjusted the machine, the beam of energy the machine was projecting tightening and focusing on the Tattoo of the arrow piercing my side.

It was ten or fifteen seconds before the warmth became heat and another ten before became pain as my skin burned. I could smell it, damn near taste it, as choking smoke poured from the point the laser was searing my skin. I could feel it moving, slowly burning away my tattoo, millimeter by millimeter. I could also feel my amulet healing me immediately after, but I knew the tattoo wasn't reforming on the repaired skin.

The torture continued. Five minutes passed, then ten, then fifteen. At the twenty-minute mark, they had to change out the glowing purple battery core in the gun, and I got a temporary reprieve.

Just about twenty-five percent of the tattoo was burned away, replaced by flawlessly healed skin. It wouldn't take much more until the tattoo failed, and they could start removing my enhancements in minutes. It was only a matter of time after that.

As they worked on the laser device I slowly recovered, or tried to at least. I was sweating, the near-constant pain leaving me shaken and feeling weak. I was breathing heavily, having been unable to stop from clenching and holding my breath, the pain making it impossible to breath properly. At first, I had resisted screaming by focusing on other things, desperately trying to focus on how I would prevent this in the future. My resistance didn't last long though, and my throat would have been screamed hoarse if it wasn't for my healing amulet.

As if sensing that I was quickly running out of options, General Dreykov returned, Natasha, coming with him. She still stared down at me while Dreykov whispered into her ear. I struggled at my bonds, the metal bending and starting to break when he pulled away.

“What do you think you're doing?” He shouted, waving the trigger through the air. “I already warned you once! I will turn your lover into dust. Stop struggling and surrender. We both know you don't have it in you to doom her.”

I shouted, screaming in frustration and rage, but collapsed back into my chair. Dreykov laughed, hand around Natasha's waist now as he continued whispering into her ear.

I barely noticed when the laser started back up, at least until the pain ratcheted up. Soon it was once again burning off my skin again. By now, I was used to the smell, but I still couldn't fight the pain. I screamed and shook, fighting against myself to keep from ripping apart the chains to escape the pain.

The change was sudden and shocking. The laser, which had been struggling just to burn the top layer of skin away, suddenly pierced one side of my body and exited the other, burning a hole through my body the size of a half dollar. I cracked a tooth as I clenched and fought against the pain, my body suddenly unable to fight my own strength, my resilience finally failing. The women quickly shut down the laser, my amulet repairing the tooth, my stomach, and the dozens of pulled muscles I had already given myself in the few seconds I had been tensing.

I could hear Dreykov's muffled laughing through the protective barrier before his voice came through, the intercom he was using crackling softly.

"Good, now set the device to a wider surface area. Start from his toes and work your way up, I want every inch of skin burned away. We will have to cut out his tongue as well, and burn the inside of his mouth in case he put any there. His amu-"

As he talked, I noticed a shadow behind him, rising up from the ground. It was Ema! As she stood fully, I could see she was considerably smaller than usual, and her face had been replaced by her actual ghost-like construct, having left the exosuit's eyes behind to make a convincing fake corpse.

Silently she approached her target, stepping behind Natasha and grabbed her, shoving Dreykov away. Then, as quickly as she could, she sliced the device off of Natasha's face and yanked it free of her eye. It was brutal and bloody, taking a concerning amount of Natasha's face with it. Without my creations to heal her, she would have most likely been mutilated for life.

"Go! Get her healed!" I called out, Ema looking up at me reluctantly as she threw the bomb across the room. "Take her to the warehouse and put her in the emergency bed!"

For a moment, it seemed like she would argue, but as my armor started to reform around me, having turned to dust in whatever room Dreykov had taken it to, she nodded and vanished, taking Natasha with her. I let out a sigh of relief. Natasha was safe and Ema wouldn't be at risk in her weakened state.

For a moment, the room was silent. Dreykov looked down at me, still sitting where he had fallen after Ema shoved him, weakly holding the detonator in his hand.

With a twist and tug, I snapped away from the restraints they had used to strap me to the chair, shards of metal scattering across the ground. I leaped through the protective barrier, pumping my wings once and bodily punching through the reinforced, bullet-resistant polycarbonate window, the entire overhanging observation area crumpling in the process.

I landed in front of Dreykov, who was already screaming in Russian. I grabbed him by his jacket and threw him back through the hole I had just made, the overweight, balding man slapping and tumbling across the broken and bullet-ridden ground before finally stopping.

I could already see the women who had been conducting my brutal tattoo removal starting to help him up, but a quick flash of the calming laser knocked them out completely. I stepped through the hole, landing and walking to the General. I grabbed him by his shirt and dropped him into the same chair I had just been in. His arm was clearly broken, as was his nose.

As I wrapped him up in the remaining chains he continued screaming in Russian. I assumed he was begging for mercy or cursing my name, but when I heard something dropping onto the ground behind me, I realized he had been giving out orders.

I turned to see that four individuals had dropped from the area I had just dragged and thrown Dreykov from. All of them were augmented with Chitauri augments and energy cores, as well as another flavor of tech I didn't quite recognize.

The first down was a large man with a scraggly beard and slicked-back hair, mostly brown with grey strands coming through. He had mechanical and cybernetic enhancements all over his body, with many of the contact and attachment points leaking blood. His face was a rictus of anger, like a bear ready to tear me apart. He had a circular shield on one arm, holding it ready similar to how Steve did.

The second person down was fully encapsulated in blue and grey armor with orange highlights that had clear articulated enhancements attached to it. I couldn't tell their gender, but their helmet was vaguely skull-shaped. They were armed with two purple glowing pistols, which were both pointed at me in a way that was reminiscent of Natasha.

The third down was a younger man, with black and white hair. He looked at me with wide, red eyes, his body twitching as he moved. His upper torso wasn't augmented at all on the surface, though his skin bulged in some places. His legs and lower torso though appeared to be mostly cased in metal armor. Or maybe they had been replaced.

After he landed, he turned, reaching up and catching the fourth addition to the group. She was a woman, wearing a red jacket over a black shirt and skirt, and most of her body was completely normal. That didn't mean her augments were any less drastic, though, as the entire top and back of her head was encased in Chitauri metal and glowing bits, the seam around her face and cheeks weeping blood.

Before any of them could move, I waved the calming laser over them. The fully encased soldier was unaffected, as they had no exposed skin. The other three sagged for a split second before jolting, fully awake.

“We knew you could put people to sleep Maker! That won’t work on them!” Dreykov shouted, rage and fear competing in his eyes. “Now! He is weakened under his armor! Taskmaster! Free me now, the rest of you, incapacitate him!”