

Ema watched me leave, the apartment door closing behind me, cutting me off from her harsh look. I didn't want to upset her, but I knew I wouldn't have been able to rest anyway. I made my way to the workshop area, pushing out my storage shed and my cabinet of tricks. I needed to get to work, there was so much to do before... I needed to be better. To be stronger and ready for anything. I took a deep breath and shook myself free of my spiraling thoughts.

I had a lot of work to do before I was ready to stop.

Head cleared, I quickly got two UCMs started printing out Red Room trackers and the improved anti-mind control lasers. I then spent the next fifteen hours in a frenzy of crafting, improving, and finally applying self-improvements. It was clear that I had gotten complacent with my old enhancement level, especially with how powerful my armor had become, even before I finished Panoply of the Maker.

It was also clear that while it was functional, the danger sense I had been blindly putting my faith in had a subtly but incredibly dangerous flaw. It was taking cues from my subconscious. I had no idea how long that had been happening, but I did have distinct memories of it starting by warning me about everything, but getting less and less intense as time went on. I even remembered it fading out its reaction to bullets when I was wearing my much older armor during Hydra's attempt to abduct Steve.

As far as I could tell, when my subconscious stopped seeing something as a threat, the danger sense would slowly stop warning me about it. That had originally been an unknown blessing, as my fight with the four enhanced Red Room agents had shown. But, after being tortured, my most basic defense removed, my undersuit gone, my armor missing, and the woman I was coming to care deeply for paraded around... it made me feel vulnerable in a way that I hadn't felt in a long time. My danger sense took that and ran with it.

I could never let anything like this happen ever again.

I started by fixing my danger sense, mixing it with display tech, then adding that to a helmet, which I then worked into a copy of the Panoply, which I then added to my bound version. Now, when I was about to be attacked, I got visual cues around the edges of my vision instead of the intense sense of danger and an even stronger desire to dodge. Technically it was a downgrade from the more instinctual version, but I was willing to accept that if it meant never getting locked up like that again.

Once I was finished with that, I started planning a full overhaul of all my enhancements from the ground up. I was no longer satisfied with just the tattoos, though they would still be a significant portion of the final design.

The first step was to maximize and enhance every aspect of the tattoos that I could. Some of the tattoos, like the resistance to elemental concepts like heat, cold, and electricity,

could only be improved so much. Others, like my toughness, got a significant boost from the addition of Uru.

With the already existing enhancements improved across the board, I started making two new additions. The first one was the addition of sorcerous protection to my skin, which was separate from my durability as I wanted any attacks to have to work through that before even reaching me. I had to start from scratch instead of using already existing armor samples because the ones I had contained divine essence, and I was forbidden from using that in my tattoos.

When I was done with that, I made an energy storage tattoo that would allow me to absorb different types of energy and feed it to either my sorcerous protection or fire it out of a correlating tattoo, which I planned on putting on one of my palms. It would be potent but primarily designed less as weapons and more as vents to help release absorbed energy. They were certainly powerful in the right circumstances though.

With my baseline enhancement done, I started with the second level. The first step was a complete redesign of my healing amulet. By combining it and a few copies, the most powerful versions of the repair tablet I had, as well as some smaller electronic devices, I created a healing amulet that would also repair things it considered to be a part of me, including tattoos. That meant that if a tattoo was removed by damage, it would repair itself. Even better, it now had an interface I could use to adjust its settings, though it was a bit hard to use on such a small device. Thankfully the addition of a projected screen fixed that and allowed me to program several verbal commands.

After that, I went on a tear, enhancing all sorts of things for self improvements. I had been holding back so long for some of the more active enhancements I had thought up, instead binding them to my armor. Now I just wanted to make sure I was never without options again.

I worked a shield projector down to as small as possible, working it down to a small metal cuff, mixing in a mental control module to it so I could control it with my mind, as long as it was in contact with me. I did the same for a healing flashlight, after enhancing it to a ridiculous degree with Uru, a copy of my old amulet, and half a dozen divine crystals.

The process continued for hours, enhancing my sleep and anti-mind control laser, my lightning gun, the most powerful repair tablet I had made yet, modified to project a repair field instead of having to hook it up to something. I turned a copy of one of my revolvers down into a small metal chunk with copper highlights by mixing in Uru, which increased its power and simplified its shape. I combined several of my already existing tattoo enhancements, and the new sorcerous protection, to small blocks of Uru as well, turning them into secondary systems in case the first ones broke.

Once I had completed making the new enhanced versions, most of them now looked strange as I had combined them with new materials regardless of what the end result was. This was fine, because all of them had one last combination process before they were read.

I gathered the appropriate metals and equipment. Some of it was left over from making the first caduceus droid, but most of it was bought in preparation for what I would be working on for S.T.A.R.S. Various titanium screws, plates, and implants were set up on UCMs to copy out, which I then took and mixed with my recent creations. Some of them lost functionality temporarily, specifically the items that required specific output points, but I was confident that they would work once I was finished.

Once I was done making and scanning the conceptually crafted implants, I finished the last step before I was ready to go under the knife. By mixing one pair of linked crystals with a bit of tattoo ink and a few other electronic and basic parts, I was able to create a method of linking the implants that needed a place to output whatever it was that they did with the tattoo ink. Of course, the bottle of ink would be useless once the implant was finished and the output tattoo was complete, but waste reduction wasn't really a problem for me.

The final two steps before I could begin were to double-check all of my scans for any negative side effects, something I had been doing throughout the whole process, and removing all of the remaining tattoos on my body, reducing me back down to basic human.

Three caduceus droids performed the surgery minutes after I was done removing my tattoos, as I wanted to spend as little time as possible without my enhancements. Under my own watchful eye, wearing a medical knowledge ring and a pain-killing ring, the robots cut me open and began attaching the enhancements to my bones. It was bloody, disconcerting, and nerve-wracking, especially as I was used to any of my injuries healing immediately, while these stuck around to let the droids work.

The final step in the surgery was the healing and repairing implant, which I couldn't watch as the droids were setting it into my skull. I could feel the moment it activated though, as my body began to heal, the strange feeling of my skull being exposed almost immediately disappearing.

Once that was done, Ema, whose exosuit had long since finished its repairs, started the process of applying my tattoos. Able to use two tattoo guns at once and work at an impressive pace, she finished my tattoos, most of which were just invisible patches, in only an hour or so. The last step was linking the implants and tattoos that needed to function to my palms. My right hand had my nonlethal and healing options, while my left had the potential and very lethal options.

Ema immediately tried to get me to stop and head to bed, but I told her to leave me alone, I had a few more things to do before I was satisfied. Before I could stop.

The first step was upgrading Ema's exosuit. Somewhere along the line I had stopped upgrading it, which was honestly unacceptable. First, I applied Uru, divine essence and sorcerous protection to the dormant suit, increasing its potency up to S tier. I then carved out her emerald eyes, again while the exosuit was shut down, and copied them a dozen times with a UCM, before combining them with universal scanners and four pairs of enhanced vision goggles. When I was done I put the one set back into place and repaired them, before letting her absorb the extras, giving her six more spare eyes.

After that, I had Ema reform her exosuit and portion off half-foot cubes of material. Four of them were combined with conceptually crafted rifles that I got from a battle bot and improved with Uru and divine essence. The other two portions were put inside small containers, which I then copied and stacked together in order to expand their storage and cement them as exosuit metal storage. By the time I stopped stacking them, they held enough material for her to make a second body. I copied her exosuit entirely and added the additions to the new dormant block before combining it with her original dormant one.

Before Ema can even say anything, I move on to my next project, ignoring her completely. I needed to be stronger, I needed my friends to be better protected. What would happen when the Skrulls came? When Galactus showed up? I couldn't depend on last-second saves from Ema, I needed to be ready. I needed to be stronger! I needed-

I was halfway through an update to my revolvers when I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Natasha, her eyes locked on mine. Her hair was back, and she looked rested, but I could tell she was nervous. Her posture showed more vulnerability and openness than I had ever seen in her before. I opened my mouth to say something, but no sound came out. Instead, she took my hand, pulled the card I was examining from it, and put it down on the table.

"It's okay, Carson. You saved me, and stopped him before he got too far," She said, her other hand coming up to hold my cheek. "We are okay, we are safe,"

"I need... There's more out there..."

"I know. There is always more Carson. Always more that could be done, always more you wish you did. Always regrets. But right now, your okay, and I'm okay."

"I should have seen it coming Natasha, I -"

"Carson, I know you know things that you shouldn't," She said, looking me in the eye. "I've known for a while, since I first met you. At first, I thought you just had an intelligence source we didn't know about. But it's more than that, isn't it?"

I wince, unable to really lie to her, not when she asked me so directly.

"It is," I respond simply. "I-"

She put her finger to my mouth, stopping me in my tracks, before leaning in and kissing me. When she pulled away she held my face in her hands.

“It doesn’t matter. Well... it probably does, but right now it's not important,” She assured me, showing me her real smile again. “Let me show you what is.”

She took my hand again and gave it a squeeze, before pulling me slightly, leading me away from my workshop. We passed through my apartment without a word as she led me to my bedroom, the door shutting behind us.

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We stayed in bed until late the next day.

Alfred brought us food, and we spent a lot of time in bed, pressed together, enjoying the stability and support that having someone that close to you brought. We did *other* things as well, but not until I had slept for ten hours.

When we did finally leave the bedroom, I led Natasha back to the warehouse, sitting her down on a bench. We both agreed that if this relationship, which was now very much an official, exclusive and solid thing, was going to work, Natasha needed to be enhanced as I was, or at least close to it. She would still be working for Shield, but now she expected me to warn her when I was going on adventures or got sucked into a problem.

And because she refused to know I was involved in something and not be able to help, she agreed to go through with her enhancements. She wasn't interested in the active tools I now had implanted in my body, but the passive buffs, protections, and enhancements were all necessary.

Since all of her tattoos would be still invisible, I didn't need to get Ema, and once her new healing and repairing implant was set, as well as her backup durability enhancements, I got to work on her tattoos, covering a significant portion of her body in undetectable powerups.

When her personal enhancements were done, I began upgrading her equipment. She stopped me then, worried about making her too powerful, but I waved her concerns away. I was constantly improving over time, anything I made now would inevitably be obsolete at some point.

If something ever happened, I would just have to push myself a bit to make something capable of stopping her, but it wouldn't be difficult. I demonstrated that by showing her how my most powerful blades were already capable of damaging the armor, and that these blades were just stacked knives and swords. If I wanted to get serious about taking down someone who had

somehow gained access to this armor, I could have Tony whip up an energy sword, or maybe a vibroblade.

Suitably assured, Natasha relented, and I got to work. I took an unbound copy of the Panoply and mixed it with her shape-changing uniform, which she had taken to calling her omni-suit. This name was carried over after the combination, as the resulting armor was called "Omni-Armor of the Widow".

I bound it to her and walked her through the basics, going over the suit's abilities. She was a little put off by the extra arms but understood how useful they could be in a pinch. Ema, who had vanished sometime after Natasha had woken up and pulled me from my manic crafting episode, returned as I was explaining just how fast the wings that Natasha now had access to could go.

"Ema," I started, before taking a breath, shaking my head, and starting again. "I'm sorry for being an ass. I... well you know what I was doing, but you didn't deserve the shitty attitude for helping me."

"It's alright. You were hurting and struggling with everything that happened," She assured me with a somber smile. "I didn't blame you anyway."

We talked for a while, about what was going on down on Earth, where Ema had apparently been, helping Nick Fury, answering his questions, and delivering the equipment I had copied for them. Shield apparently had the situation well in hand, in no small part due to protocols that had been developed after they dealt with Hydra. She also explained to Natasha that Yelena had been captured and de-programmed and that she was now asking for her.

Natasha let out a long sigh, rubbing her eyes before agreeing to go see her. She explained that while she did care about her pseudo-family on some level, she had been fully prepared to never see them again. Yelena had come to visit her without warning, and Dreykov had ambushed her, knocking her out, and removed her anti-mind control jewelry.

We spent the rest of the day getting used to our new enhancements. Mine weren't that difficult as I was not only used to it, but the improvements were noticeable, but not overwhelming. Natasha on the other hand spent several hours doing a few different control exercises. We ended the day with all three of us sparring for a few hours, both with and without armor and with and without Ema going all out.

We slept well after a hearty meal.

The next day we traveled back down to Earth, or more specifically the helicarrier that was floating above the Seventh Hell Prison, though it wouldn't be there much longer. Both Natasha and I needed to have a long conversation with Fury, explaining both what had happened as well as the situation with our relationship. Unsurprisingly he was already aware

that we were seeing each other, which rendered my previous anxiety about revealing it before Natasha was ready pointless. We were interviewed and debriefed, before both of us left the helicarrier, flying some distance before traveling away.

Not long after that, Natasha and I landed at the Barton Farm. I had a promise to keep, late as it was, and this farm was Natasha's happy place. I quickly put down an incredibly powerful shield generator, attached it to a ward stone, and keyed its control to Clint and Luara. I also built an impressive, fully stocked bomb shelter under their barn that would let them survive indefinitely, and was strong enough to survive the planet cracking in two. It also had a landing pad so that if something happened Natasha or I could come to get them

They were Natasha's second family, I wanted them as protected as possible.

We ended up staying for dinner, spending the time that the kids were at school talking about what had happened. I could see Clint was furious but expressed his gratitude for coming to Natasha's rescue, and Luara clearly felt for both of us. I once again wondered what Laura's connection was to Clint and Natasha's line of work, but kept my questions to myself. When the kids returned, and after we had dinner, Natasha and I slept in what she called the guest room but what the Bartons called Natasha's room.

The next morning, after a breakfast of pancakes and bacon, I left to head back to the warehouse, while Natasha stayed on Earth with the Bartons. I promised to come pick her up in a day or two and bring her home, which she appreciated. We said goodbye with a kiss, and a series of gasps that reminded both of us that it was the weekend, which meant a barrage of questions from the littlest Bartons.

I guiltlessly left Natasha to answer those questions while I traveled away, back up to the warehouse. I spent a few minutes cleaning and prepping my workstation before traveling to my landing pad at S.T.A.R.S. and hunting down Tony. He covered it with sarcasm and sass, but I could tell he was annoyed about the disappearing act. Pepper had no reason to hide her annoyance though, giving me quite a talking-to until I got a chance to explain why I was shirking my responsibilities to the nonprofit think tank. She apologized profusely when I was done.

Tony just poured me a glass of expensive brandy.

The rest of the week was spent spending time with Natasha, helping Shield through the aftershocks of the Red Room, and working through the backlog of requests from S.T.A.R.S. Natasha was a frequent guest in the warehouse, and she kept me from overworking myself to make up for the few days that I was busy. When the week ended, I was all caught up with everything, and ready to move on to the next project.