**Chapter 69** (Before we begin, I'm sorry. Go on. See you at the end.) "Get Maximo ." I hear that icy voice I could recognize anywhere speak, e ectively cutting through all emotions that were once fluttering around inside of me, cutting straight through them, scattering them like dust in the wind to ice my heart, leaving nothing but fright in its wake. I feel my body sti en up. Instinctively, it knows. Sense memory. I don't want to turn my head away from Livvy. If I do, it'll be over. Whatever solace I had for that fleeting moment will be nothing but a memory that I can add to the ones I see play behind my closed eyelids every night. But she is unaware of all of this. Of course she is. As well as she has learned to read me these past months she's known me, she still doesn't know. Or maybe she does. But she can't understand. And so, she lets her hands drop from my face. And she shouldn't leave me, but she looks away. I should feel my heart erratically beating against my ribs in fear, but it's quiet. Like it doesn't want to make a noise in fear that it'll give us away. I keep staring at Livvy. I've entered some sort of trans, wherein I feel locked inside my own body, unable to control anything. The cu s around my limp wrists hum and it's all I can hear as my scarlet frenzied tries to find a way out to help me, to save me. Livvy says something, always quick to words, finding them so much easier to control than I do. She sounds mu led to me, as though there is a wall of water between us. She looks mad, her face scrunched up in that way I would usually find amusing. But now I can tell she's scared. Her thoughts scuttle past each other in a frenzied race, so quick I can't tell them apart unless I really listen in. She's scared for me. And I justgot her back. I struggle to take in a shaky breath. It's not fair. It's not fair. A little part of me feels ashamed. No, it isn't fair. I should know. But I should also know that everything I've gone through hasn't just happened tome. I've always had an active part. Well, ever since my parents, anyway. But as I watch Livvy frown and place a hand out in front of me, blocking me, trying to once again place herself in-between me and my fate, I know none of this should ever have happened to her. I shouldn't have happened to her. So no, although fairness isn't ever in the cards for me, I know that equally, it won't ever be for her either, because of me. A blurry of a black-clad guard pushes Livvy away and all I am able to do is blink lamely, frozen in place where she le me, like a marionette that's been discarded. Useless when I should be nothing but. Unfortunately for me, I am not le discarded for long. I'm roughly yanked up by my arms. My legs give way at first and someone struggles to hold me up, until someone else joins and together they keep me standing between their unyielding bodies, hard and steady like old trees, steadying their much younger and fragile companion. I don't even have the will to fight them. What damage could I ever achieve, just me? I've never done anything important without my scarlet, never been anyone important without my scarlet. Instead, I hang there, limp and silent, my eyes glazed over. Livvy shouts something at me, but I can't understand. It's almost as she's speaking in a foreign language. Why can't I do anything? If not for me, for her? But not even for Livvy am I able to force my body to do anything to defend itself or her. I'm pulled backward, away from Livvy. She isn't a ected by my weird paralysis. I watch her jump up and run for me, trying to pry someone's hands o of me. They struggle for a bit before someone pulls her o . She struggles against her restrainer. I wish she wouldn't. My heart tightens painfully in my chest at the sight of her, and I just feel scared. I wish she'd stop. My brain is still replaying her confession. Love. There's a flicker of life in my heart. Having only heard that particular word roll from her tongue once before, hearing it again, now, of all times, it's the cruelest of jokes. I know I know love. I've had it, felt it, tasted it. And lost it. As I watch her struggle against the guards, I know I can't bear to lose it again. Why I let it happen I don't know. Maybe because I'm never strong enough, just me on my own. Just like I need my scarlet I need love, and maybe I'm selfish to accept it from her when I should have known how it would end. But I've always been weak alone. And with her, I'm finally not. I'm not alone, and I'm not weak, and I'm something, someone's. I watch Livvy twist a guard's arm painfully behind his back and I'm struck by a realization that makes me want to curl up in a small ball. Love would be enough to save us from the darkness inside the both of us, but it will never be enough for the rest of the world. If it were, I'd be the richest person in the world. And then, before I have any chance to react whatsoever, a dark-clad guard brings out his weapon and aims it at Livvy. The cold around my heart intensifies. "No!" I finally sputter out, blood pounding painfully loudly in my ears, unable to bear witness to this. Everyone freezes. Livvy finally stops fighting. She's staring at the gun pointing at her face, mere millimeters away from her. I don't dare move a muscle. The cu s around my wrists are the only noise in the room as they loudly hum, keeping my scarlet hidden when all I want to do is to rip everyone in the room who has dared touch her apart painfully. My scarlet tries to obey, but can't. I feel ill, as though I'm running a hundred-degree fever and I sink slightly further into the two guards holding me upright. Their grip on me tightens. The collar around my neck couldn't be any tighter if it wanted, and I feel so claustrophobic. But I stay still. The guard pointing the gun at Livvy turns and looks at me, and laughs straight in my face. Without even looking at her, smirking at me, he hits Livvy in the head, hard, with the gun. He shouldn't still stand there, smiling. He should be screaming in pain. And yet she is the one that goes tumbling down to the floor, and she is the one who doesn't move while he holsters his gun proudly, his thoughts clicking jovially. The cold in my chest spreads and I finally manage to struggle against my captors, the pain in my abdomen searing. It's fruitless, and instead of moving towards Livvy, I'm pulled away, away, away. Then, the door to the cell shuts with a loud crash in front of my nose, and she's gone from my view, and I'm alone. I can still hear her despite her being unconscious. Her thoughts are like a slow-flowing river, now. I close my eyes and stay with her as they drag me away. I can almost imagine lying awake in the dead of night next to her, trying to stay ever so still as to not wake her as I let myself be lulled away by her thoughts, one of those rare moments when I feel most at peace. It gets increasingly harder to feel her, and the prickling thoughts of the people around me get louder and more demanding. Their thoughts jumble together, each clamoring for my attention, ripping at me with their claws. I push them away as best as I can, but I'm tired, and I am partially numb to pain. ... hope they give her a good beating... ... I wonder if I should wear my red boxers, or my black... ... why Jerry got promoted instead of me, now I'm here dragging prisoners around... I give up trying to hide behind my walls and all of their thoughts flood me, their emotions mixing with mine, and more people from floors above join in until I can't tell up from down and myself from anyone

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night before Stark's party. I close my eyes and let myself revisit the night. I can almost imagine the music making the air vibrate around me, smell Natasha's perfume as she leans in to talk to me, and feel the way my stomach would twist every time I feel Livvy sneak a look at me, thinking I'm not aware of it every time she does it. I'm a master at what if's, and I let myself imagine a world in which I might have met Livvy some other way, a world in which there was no Scarlet Witch, a world where there was just Wanda. I wonder if I would have even considered letting myself fall for a girl in this what-if-world. I always looked up to women, growing up, but I never allowed myself to think of these as crushes. Who would I have turned out to be if Stark's bomb never fell on my block? My scarlet angrily twitches in response, almost as if it feels hurt that I allow myself to think of it being gone. "You might as well be." I whisper to it, my eyes still closed. "Where are you?" It doesn't of course answer, but twists in me, making me feel that rush I feel whenever I use my scarlet. It makes me smile. Maybe it's not too bad to have it with me, even though I can't use it. Hours pass with nothing happening. I pace, and I sit. I sit and I dream. Then, I pace again. I've explored every inch of the circular cage by the time I finally can sense a group of people approaching. I place myself by the furthest away curvature of the wall from the big, gray door, keeping the ominous chair in between myself and whoever is about to enter. I feel their minds pulsate excitedly, which makes me all the more guarded. Whatever makes Hydra happy has rarely made anyone else happy. The door swings open and two guards place themselves on either

side of the door, staring straight ahead, not even casting me a glance. Two further guards stomp in, their minds dark and they ready their guns just for show, keeping them pointed at the ground in front of them. This pair stares straight at me. I feel her before I see her. The hair on the back of my neck prickles and my scarlet angrily swirls. Her mind feels silky smooth, the color of dark blue velvet. There's nothing to grasp onto, to read. And then Strucker walks in, wearing a long, impractical black robe, her hair always immaculately perched atop her bony head, her eyes instantly meeting mine and I feel myself

"Hello, Wanda." She amicably says, entering the room, instantly

break into a cold sweat.

rendering it colder.

Eventually, I'm brought back to myself by slamming hard into the ground, my knees jolting painfully at the impact and I let out a

I hear a door shut behind me, and lock. I struggle momentarily to distance myself from the hundreds of consciousnesses I was blending in with just seconds ago, but I finally manage to return to my tired self. I stay seated on the cold floor as I look around my new cell. It's a lot bigger than the previous one, and notably, it's circular in shape. In

the middle of the room, there is a big chair bolted to the floor, shackles on the armrests and on its legs. I don't like the feel of the chair. It makes me shiver. Around it are numerous computers and

I find it in me to get up and walk around the chair once, surveilling it. My scarlet anxiously pounds against my veins, but I can't let it out. I absentmindedly let myself fiddle with the cu s as I make my way around the chair. I wonder what this chair does. It seems familiar, somehow. I wonder who has sat on it. And I wonder why it makes all of me want to run as far away from it as possible. The computers behind it all seem to be turned o . I try to look at one, but the screen stays stubbornly black. O en, I find myself envying Natasha, Clint, or even Stark. They only had themselves to rely on, and I'm sure they could figure this out in no time. I can't rely on myself. It's always my

I distance myself from the chair and sit myself down, leaning against the curved wall. It's not as bright in here as in the other cell. I feel all my tiredness catch up to me. I haven't slept properly since... hard to tell as I have no way of measuring time in here. Must've been the

surprised gasp at being returned to the present.

wires that I know nothing of.

scarlet that saves me, and when it can't...

Two men in dark suits enter a er her, both of them eyeing me carefully. I know a further two guards are waiting just outside alongside a few other minds that feel harsh and short and unfamiliar, yet familiar, somehow. I return my attention to Strucker, who is watching me with a taut smile. "Where is she?" I ask through gritted teeth. "If you hurt her-" "I'm so sorry for the way you have been treated since arriving here." Strucker interrupts me, almost looking bored, her voice crisp and her consonants clear. "I didn't arrive you drugged me." I correct her, my voice scratchy from being silent for so long. Strucker grins at my words and shrugs, as though it makes little di erence. I suppose it doesn't, really. Instead of arguing with me, she sighs, looking around the room in astonishment, as though she's never seen anything as spectacular. I look around too, just in case I missed something. I didn't, unless she's looking at the slightly suspicious-looking orange stain up high near the ceiling. "This is my favorite room in the entire compound, you know that, Wanda?" Strucker sighs, looking back at me with an expression I don't like at all. My scarlet twinges in response. I don't answer, so she continues. "So many lives changed in here. So many lives helped. Your Olivia could attest to that, too." "Don't." I warn, finally biting, and Strucker seems pleased at finding a foothold. "You know, I was quite surprised at first, Wanda. I would not have placed my bets on her, of all people. I thought you liked them a little... less human." Her lips almost disappear as she grins and my fingers twitch by my sides, as though I can summon balls of crackling scarlet.

"Thought you liked the improved version we sent back to you. I

"Zatkni past." I snarl and she laughs heartily, finding my change of

"YA byl by vezhliv na tvoyem meste" She advises me coldly, no trace

Strucker pauses for a moment, reassessing. "Vernut. Rather genius of

"You're nothing but a sad shadow." I tell her and she narrows her dark

"Shadows are the deadliest, Wanda dear. You should know. You're haunted by many." My heart clenches painfully at her words, but I try to keep a brave face on, just as Natasha would've wanted me to.

"Half of the fight is how they perceive youNatasha would say.

"Why don't you take a seat, and I'll tell you why you're here, hmm?"

"Wanda." Strucker tsk-tsks, just as I knew she would. "Take a seat or

I shoot a glance at the burly guards, who are staring at me coolly. I know that I will end up on that chair whether I walk there myself or not, and with Natasha's lesson still ringing in my ears, I decide to not degrade myself any further and make them carry me there, kicking

So, I silently walk around the back of the chair, past Strucker, keeping

my head held high, without giving her as much as a glance. I eventually finally sit down on the chair, instantly shivering. I feel Strucker's mind click unusually loudly at the sight of me on the chair

"Make them fear you before you even li a finger."

"I prefer to stand." I state, delaying the inevitable.

Strucker brings my attention back onto her.

thought she was rather mechanical, don't you?"

language amusing.

of her laughter present.

me, don't you think?"

eyes at me.

I'll make you."

and screaming.

and all I want to do is jump out of it, but I don't. Strucker walks back to the front of the room, watching me with such glee I'm almost surprised she's not bouncing around the room. I keep my face straight, my eyes shooting daggers at the woman I wish I could see drop dead. "Oh, you have no idea how long I have worked to have you back here. To have you on this chair." Strucker marvels again, not able to hide her excitement. She waves a hand lazily, and the minds I felt earlier enter the room. They belong to men clad in white coats. My heart begins to pound quickly at the sight of them. I can't. Not again. When Pietro and I le, I thought I never, ever had to endure-"Begin your preparations." Strucker orders and I snap back to the present, so horrifyingly like my past. "What are you doing?" I try to sound demanding, but my voice comes out sounding pitifully like the little angry girl I used to be, before everything happened to me.

"Oh Wanda, don't you want to become even better, just like we made you better all those years ago?" Strucker asks and one of the whitecoats ties to shackles of the armchair around my right hand.

I panic, li my hand up, slipping through the grasps of the man's stubby, wrinkly fingers, and accidentally smack him straight in the face. Without any hesitation two of the guards speed up towards me as the man I just hit howls in pain, clutching his nose. It seems like everything is moving in slow motion at the same time as I swear everything exists in fast motion. I jump out of the chair as though burned, but the guards are on me, pushing me back into the chair.

"No, no, please." I beg, wriggling and turning as best I can, but I'm no

They easily hold me down and fasten my clawing hands to the armrests and my kicking feet to the chair's legs. I try to rip myself free, but to no avail. I growl and go still, my scarlet burning so hotly in my veins I am surprised I'm not exploding in scarlet flame and I bet my eyes have gone scarlet. I hope it's enough to scare the lot of them.

"Let me go now and I will only kill half of you." I demand, my chest

"There she is. Marvelous!" Strucker points at me and looks approvingly at the men I suits, who do not seem to share in her

"You're sure this will work?" One of them looks away from me towards Strucker, his face slightly contorted in disbelief.

"Of course it will!" Strucker says loudly, turning towards the men, all of them now ignoring me entirely, everyone that is except for the white-coats who start attaching measuring tubes and chords to me.

match for the guards.

heaving.

confidence.

"We've observed the other girl and our... upgrades carefully." Strucker explains. "But she managed to break loose. Not once, but severaltimes. Most notably right here, in ourcell. And we saw shewas behind it." One of the suits angrily remarks, nodding his head towards me. "And we've monitored that as well!" Strucker exclaims, throwing her hands in the air. "That little... hitch has allowed our scientists to create an upgraded protocol, it won't happen again. Fool-proof." "How can we be so certain? If shebreaks through..." One of the men squeaks and looks at me, scared, his mind ticking furiously, telling him to run away now. "You have my promise. It will not happen. I have been working on this project for a decade. I've worked it all out. She is ours." Strucker gives the men a smile that clearly shows she's done with this discussion.

She turns to look at me and her smile widens at the sight of me unable to move, connected to the machines. She walks up, her heels clicking loudly on the floor. I keep my eyes on her, trying to not show her how scared I am. Because I am. I've gone through this before, but with another Strucker in front of me. I can't do it again. LivvyJt's in vain, I know it. Strucker places a hand on my hand, her eyes lighting

"Oh, if only I had your power..." She whispers, looking up at me and I

"Hmm... actually, can we look into that, Alexei?" Strucker speaks up,

"I've been waiting patiently for this for ten years." Strucker takes a tiny step back, admiring the whole set-up in front of her. Machines begin whirring behind me. I struggle against my restraints again to no

"Fuck you. You'll never be what he was." I spit out and a flash of anger

"You're right, Wanda. I'll never be what my dear, departed husband was. I'll be much greater." Strucker admirably says, seemingly

"And so will your downfall be, too." I say, trying to sound more

"Hmm. I doubt it. My husband's mistake was trusting you, dear." Strucker says and leans forwards, patting me on my cheek. "I won't a

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once again have to fight my fight or flight impulse.

looking somewhere behind my le shoulder.

"Of course, ma'am." Someone replies.

crosses Strucker's face.

growing a whole inch taller.

and the machines whirr loudly.

my lashes and roll down my cheek.

"Yes, ma'am." Someone grumbles.

"Oh, she's asking for more!"

confident than I feel.

up as she studies my fingers.

make the same mistake." As she turns her back towards me and starts walking towards her companions, someone fastens a leathery strap over my forehead. As the strap tightens so does my chest. No, no, noJ haven't gone through this myself, but I heard others. And I saw this in Livvy's mind. And I felt the pain. I can't even turn my head in panic now, every bit of me is restrained. I gulp against the collar around my neck, feeling as though I'm not able to breathe. "Please." I gasp, one last attempt at reasoning. I look at Strucker, wide-eyed, my eyes welling up. "I can't-" I'm not even allowed to finish my sentence as one of the white-coats yanks my jaw open and sticks in a huge bite block in my mouth, e ectively shutting me up. "Your girlfriendwas quite impressive in this chair. Let's see how you fare." Strucker loudly says from her spot in the middle of the people by the door. "Warm her up." "Here goes." One of the white-coats mutters somewhere behind me

Without warning, a searing white pain flashes before my eyes and I gasp, taken by surprise. I blink a couple of times, feeling disoriented. The room spins back into focus. My scarlet lurches, trying to come to my defense, but again, it's stopped. I feel a lone tear slowly drop from

"Beautiful." Strucker applauds and I feel nothing but hate boil up inside of me and I yank at my restraints, if nothing else, just for show.

This time, despite being prepared, the pain still rips through me with surprising ferocity. It burns hot, yet cold, ripping through my entire being and I clench my jaw, my teeth sinking into the object in my mouth in a silent scream. I've felt worse! tell myself as I come to later, Strucker returning in my view. I've felt worse, and she will feel a hundred times worse. Another few rounds of silent, ripping agony later, I struggle remembering my curse. All I know is that I cannot allow myself to scream. If I scream, they win. Who they are, I'm not totally certain of.

favorite mug. She looks over at me and those clichéd butterflies come alive inside of my chest. My surroundings distort into shapes I cannot understand and Olivia's face twists into something unrecognizable and I float, spin, sink, am ripped apart. Is it my scarlet? No. The pain washes over me in such force it draws out a scream that emanated from my core and all I can do is scream as it bites through every single fiber of me.

"I'm proud of how you've grown. You're so strong now. Stronger than any of us would have dreamed. You'll do great things for us, Alaya

Ved'ma"

I'm in my cabin. It's dusk. Maybe dawn. I'm sitting on one end of the couch, and Olivia is sitting on the other. I can almost smell the forest around us. I'm holding a cup of tea. Olivia takes a swig from my

A/N: Don't come for me, I know, I know, and I'm so sorry:( Continue reading next part  $\Box$