

## Chapter 10

By the time the light outside has retreated behind the mountains and the birds have stopped their incessant twittering, the wind has started picking up around the cabin in the valley and the temperature has dropped significantly. Maximo has retreated into her room, closing the door between us, which I've allowed her having checked the room for any potential routes of escape. The cabin has slowly but surely returned to its original dark and heavy feel, whatever light is making its way through the windows not strong enough to banish the shadows from inside. The once rather comfortable couch is no longer that, but rather creaky and however I try positioning myself, I can't seem to get comfortable and escape the throbbing pain everywhere.

For the entirety of the day, I've spent my time dozing on and off, the painkillers Maximo handed me having allowed me to find rest in my sleep. I'm eventually forced off the couch by a particularly pestering gust of wind which is set on slamming the door to the cabin against the body of the S.W.O.R.D. agent, whom I've been willing to ignore and pretend has not been lying there for hours. I leave the sunken couch, slowly making my way toward the entrance to the cabin, ignoring the disarray all around me. The agent is lying on his front, head turned away from me. The gust of wind returns, as if to taunt me, and the door slams onto the agent's body once again. Muttering, I get ready to start hoisting the agent out of the cabin. When I lean down to grab his kevlar vest for leverage, my heart sinks as I realize the man in front of me is indeed not a S.W.O.R.D. agent, but the tall, lanky FBI agent, whom I found actually bearable.

I stand there for a minute, still, the only sounds around me the whistle of the wind, and the pressing solitude of the outside. I haven't heard a sound from Maximo's room in hours; she must have fallen asleep. At the thought of her and the sight of the agent, my stomach turns, and a knot forms inside of me. He died for absolutely nothing, I think as the sound he made when Maximo thrust him into the ceiling plays in my ears. Fuelled by a desire to finally close this case, I lean down once again and start dragging the man out of the cabin. With every move I make my ribs dig into me, but I don't pay them any attention. I'm focused on one objective now: return Maximo to the U.S. to answer for her actions.

When the man is finally out of the cabin, I try to prop him up against the outer wall on the porch. His body won't comply, already having turned completely rigid, so I have to admit defeat and leave him lying there.

I stomp back into the cabin and head straight to Maximo's room, opening the door without bothering to knock. The room is completely dark, but I can still make her out lying on the bed over the covers.

"Get up." I tell her, standing in the doorway.

She makes no move to indicate that she has heard me, so I walk up to her bed and look down at her. She's sleeping.

"Get up. We're leaving." I speak again, more loudly.

Again, no sign of movement. I grow slightly concerned, wondering if the bandage I wrapped around her earlier has come undone and the bleeding has started again. I walk around the bed and to the side of the bed Maximo is sleeping on. I frown, seeing no visible signs of anything being wrong.

"Maximo." I try, but she remains still.

Having grown slightly fearful, I touch her shoulder, trying to rouse her. Her shoulder is warm underneath the sweater, but she's completely limp. I touch her forehead but it's a normal temperature. I check for a pulse, which I find and count as normal if a little on the quick side. Her chest is rising and falling so slowly. I dare take a look under her sweater to inspect the bandage, but it seems alright to me. I then go to lift up one of her eyelids, but remove my hand as if I've been burned. Her eyes are moving underneath her eyelids from left to right, rapidly, a soft red glow to them. That is when I notice the cuts around her wrists are humming loudly, as if working against something.

"Maximo, stop." I try, my hand coming to rest on the gun I've refastened around my thigh.

I feel a sudden presence in the room, one other than mine and Maximo's, and twirl around, gun already brandished. I almost drop the gun when I see that the presence I felt and who I am currently pointing my gun at is... Maximo. She's standing in the far corner of the room, her eyes red as fire, wearing dark red clothes, a sort of crown on her head over her wild hair. I quickly glance over at the other Maximo, still lying in her sweatpants on the bed, unmoving.

"What?" I ask no one in particular, trying to make sense of the situation.

"We are not going." Maximo in the corner speaks and she makes a glowing red light of magic appear in her right hand, twirling it in my direction. I undo the safety of the gun just and aim and fire at her right shoulder. Maximo waves lazily with her hand, unfazed.

Without thinking, I point the gun at Maximo on the bed. I was not going to shoot, but somehow the idea popped into my head. Other Maximo does apparently not like what I have just done as she shoots a red ball of magic at me which hits me square in the chest, sending me flying onto the wall. I hit it hard, the wind being knocked out of me -again. I sink down on the floor, seeing stars, the room spinning around me.

A small hand suddenly rests on my shoulder and my vision is focused onto Maximo's -sweatpants Maximo's face in front of mine. I quickly swat her hand off me and she retreats slightly, giving me more space with a guilty look on her face.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-" She begins, but stops mid-sentence as I try pushing myself up to standing, but give up not even midway, wheezing. My ribs did not like that.

"I'm so so-" She begins again.

"How did you do that?" I cut her off breathily, hand over my ribcage. She looks down at my ribs, the guilty look still etched on her face.

"How are your ribs?" She tries diverting.

"Better than ever." I smirk. "How did you do that?"

"I told you, they stop me from physically affecting things." Maximo says, still crouching in front of me, her hair brushing over my knees.

"I'd say I'm pretty physically affected." I mutter, still not daring to move.

"I'm sorry, I-" She says, faltering, her eyes quickly finding my right knee very interesting. "I'm still learning." She finishes quietly.

"Learning?" I repeat, incredulously, making Maximo give out a soft breathy chuckle.

"I'm sorry. Can you stand up?"

"I don't know." I answer honestly, trying to stand up again but having to give up very quickly once more. "Fuck."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that." I huff, annoyed.

"Sorry, I really didn't mean to hurt you." Maximo says and meets my eyes. It really is starting to mess with my mind how she goes from this; flushed cheeks and soft green eyes to whomever or whatever the hell she is when she's all Eye of Sauron.

"Eyes of Sauron, perhaps." She corrects me, raising one eyebrow.

"Ok, not now."

"I guess I did fire a gun at... you?" I give in with a defeated smile and she smiles widely. "That does not mean we're even!"

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