

Chapter 32

Since my talk with Darcy, I've sat in near silence, only occasionally humming along to some song on the radio which I keep on to distract myself from spiraling into thoughts I know won't do anything to ease the unease I'm feeling. The drive feels like it'll never end with the landscapes around me only subtly changing. I try to stop as seldom as I can as the gnawing feeling of anxiety pushes me forward, not allowing me to rest. The roads are small and narrow as I finally enter Transia as the sun just starts setting and my eyes are becoming unbearably dry from exhaustion.

The forests I drive by have turned old, dark, and unfriendly, making me shiver despite the warm air in the car. I decide to make a quick stop at a small service station, deciding that I won't do anyone any good if I show up famished and my bladder close to bursting.

Somehow, I don't think I'd make a very good impression would I to burst in to stop whatever the dark-haired woman and Maximo are planning just to pee myself.

Chuckling, I shut off the engine to the car and open the door, feeling a gust of cool air instantly dissipating whatever warmth I'd found inside the car. My legs protest when I stumble out of the car and I feel the familiar, but not as an open-hitting twinge of pain from my ribs. The service station seems to not be very frequently visited as the cashier - an old man looks up in surprise when he hears me enter. I flash him nothing more than a quick, polite smile and enter further into the small building. After having found the bathrooms I pick out a packet of chips and a coke zero. Not the healthiest, but I distrust anything else I see in the shop.

The man scans my items and I go to pay him, but he stops me before I can hand him my card. I look up, confused.

"Not from here?" He asks me with a cracked voice in Hungarian and his thick, unruly eyebrows rise as to indicate his curiosity.

I shake my head, not trusting whatever remnants of Hungarian I do remember to be good enough would he start an actual conversation. I try handing him my card again, which he refuses, again.

"Where?" He asks me. I surveil him for a moment, trying to gauge why he is asking me these questions - if there's an ulterior motive outside of being friendly.

"Where going?" I ask back in Hungarian, and he nods. "Uh, mountain."

"Wundagore?" He replies and his tone makes a shiver run down my back. "Bad things happen there."

"I know. I try stop." I say, not really knowing why I am explaining myself to him.

"Hmm." Is all he says before reaching over to his shelf to grab something which I realize is a map of Transia as he presents it to me.

"Thank you?" I give him a puzzled look to which he shakes his head knowingly, with a small smile on his lips.

"Young people."

I don't know what to say to that, so instead, I try giving him my card again. He refuses, again and I sigh impatiently.

"Not work here." He says, shaking his head again.

"I don't have money." I pat my pockets as if to show him they're empty. He watches my movements and then lets out a croaky laugh.

"Ok. You go." He pushes the chips and coke towards me which I struggle with slightly, already holding the map and with my left arm still in the sling.

"Thank you." This time, I give him a grateful smile, and my stomach grumbles.

He merely shakes his head at me and waves me on. I nod once more before stepping out into the cooling air. The sun is still setting, its rays having turned a deep orange while I've been inside. I plop down into the driver's seat, not wasting any time before tearing open the bag of crisps using my hand and my teeth. Dignified is not what I am going for, here. After having shoved a few mouthfuls of chips into me, downing that with a few swigs of the coke, I set off again, looking down at my phone to make sure I am still going the right way.

Slowly but surely, the looming shadow of the mountain appears in front of me, growing bigger and bigger. The sight instantly takes me back to when I first laid eyes on it, when me and the other S.W.O.R.D. agents were making our way towards Maximo, back when everything was simple, and I couldn't even dream of being able to make my hands glow silver and jumping back in time. A smile creeps up my face when the thought of Agent Romano - or I guess I can call her Nat, now, first saw my powers. The spy's normally stoic expression had briefly grumbled and she had taken a step back, uttering a series of Russian curse words I had never thought of placing after each other in that order.

I am jerked back into the present by the car's smooth motions suddenly turn uncomfortably choppy, making me realize the road I've been driving upon has turned into a muddy path filled with potholes made by heavy rainfall. I let the car come to a stop as I check my phone again, the anxious feeling returning with full force, and the image of Nat's shocked expression fades.

"Pizdec nahui blyad!" I mutter, using a select few of Nat's favorite curses. My phone is of no use; there is no service here.

I throw my phone back down onto the passenger seat next to me and lean back with a sigh. Last time I had to venture out here I had a full team of experienced agents covering my back and leading the way. I think back to how uneasy I felt then, without ever having actually personally witnessed the frightful image of the Scarlet Witch staring at you with the most bone-chillingly hateful expression. Here I am now, with only my Glock and a few rounds of ammo, all alone, getting myself back into a quite possibly worse situation than before. And the first time hadn't ended all that well. Obviously, I am hoping to avoid having to use my gun at all, knowing that Maximo gets agitated when feeling threatened.

"Fuck." I sigh, and yet not even considering turning the car around, leaving whatever the dark-haired woman and Maximo wanted to find at mount Wundagore in my rearview mirror.

I finally snap out of whatever self-pitying state I was falling into by remembering the old man back at the service station, and his insistence of giving me the map. I eagerly grab the map and spread it out in front of me. I begin tracing my finger over the paper, following my previous route to find my position on the map. It looks like I'm not too far off. I look up, making sure the giant mountain is indeed where it is according to the map. Pleased, I drive on.

Twenty minutes later, the mountain has grown so large on my right-hand side that I can no longer see the peak out of my windows. I have had to drive slower than I naturally felt like driving due to my nerves since the road is in such a bad state it constantly is threatening to break the poor car down. Finally, I reach the end of the road. I turn the key, shutting down the grateful engine one last time. The silence falls around me instantaneously, making the evergrowing darkness feel all the more ominous.

I cast one more glance down at the map and where I believe the location of Maximo's cabin to be. Based on the map I am expecting an hour's walk. Not too bad, but it is through the forest. I look around, the dark pine trees unmovingly pressing in on me from all sides. I quickly grab my gun, fasten it to the strap around my right thigh and grab my flashlight. I pocket the car keys, making sure the car is locked when I exit so that I can return to a hopefully functioning vehicle. I leave my phone, knowing it won't be of any use to me without service anyway.

"Get to the cabin. Find Maximo and the woman. Stop them. Return to the car and drive to get service and call backup if you need to." I speak loudly to myself, my voice sounding small in the otherwise unnerving silence. "Should be easy enough. Just don't piss Maximo off."

And with that, I begin my trek, cutting a path straight into the woods, leaving the setting sun at my back.

The branches keep trying to grab hold of me as I walk past, some managing to tear at my clothes, others scratching my face. However long the walk feels, I am feeling slightly less anxious now that I am moving physically. And the thought that every step gets me closer to potentially stopping Maximo from doing something which I have a feeling will be not only very stupid but very dangerous spurs me to walk with newfound intention. I am even managing to ignore the (hopefully imagined) noises around me. I am even managing to ignore the (hopefully imagined) noises around me. I am even managing to ignore the darkness when I see a pair of glowing eyes surveil me from the darkness of the woods, thinking it must be Maximo who is on me, but then whatever animal it is retreats and I shake it off.

Eventually, the sound of water reaches me and after a minute or two, I reach a small stream. The water looks almost red in the dying lights of the sunset. I follow the water downstream and as I expected, the trees around me start thinning out until I'm standing at the edge of the treeline, eyes upon the still lake. Automatically my eyes swivel to the right, and there it is. The small cabin.

Everything looks as it did last time I was here, except this time, I'm on the opposite shore of the lake, and it is earlier than last time when we arrived in the dead of the night. Now, I can still fully appreciate the humbling nature around me, cast aglow with the soft rays of the sun, now perched barely above the horizon. Mount Wundagore looms protectively over the small valley, and I feel like an intruder, horribly responsible for bringing chaos each time I arrive.

I dawdle for a while, fidgeting with one of the straps around my gun. I feel frozen in place under the shadow of the mountain. I have half a mind finally to turn around and leave whatever I don't understand be, but one more look over at the small, unassuming cabin dissuades me. I have to do this. Say whatever you will about me, but I don't leave things halfway solved. And whatever mysteries Maximo is keeping within her are not even close to resolved.

A/N: Next chapter will be a doozy, y'all. Prepareth.

And once again, thanks for reading! (Also some of y'all's comments crack me up, not gonna lie haha)

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