

Chapter 51

We've been camped out inside an empty storage facility somewhere in New Jersey for the better part of a day now. Stakeouts aren't very glamorous or exciting, I've noticed. They're rather dull. Especially if with someone as talkative (-not) as the Winter Soldier. I've kept myself busy by inspecting the contents of the pockets in my new cargo pants. There are so many! It's as though Hydra expected me to go camping. They've thought of everything I could possibly need in any scenario. Hydra takes care of its own. I was told.

Now, I'm sitting on an upside-down container, my feet dangling from the side as I'm twirling my new favorite small, sharp knife around my fingers, round and round and round. I'm waiting for the Winter Soldier to finish his habitual rounds of the warehouse and the surrounding area. I've told him we could just use our heat detectors, but he prefers to do it old school. That's on him. I'm comfortable where I am.

It's dead of night but I'm not tired in the slightest. I haven't felt the need to sleep in a few days, not since I saw that shadow of the red-haired woman, Maximo. The mere thought of her makes me accidentally mess up my twirling, and the small knife cuts a shallow, fine red line across the back of my thumb. I watch with intrigue as the red liquid pools up and starts slowly trickling down, splattering my cargo pants with small, ruby-colored stains.

"Are you done playing?" The Winter Soldier's voice interrupts my blood gazing.

He's standing right below the container, looking up at me. Apparently, he's done with patrolling. I feel momentarily annoyed that I didn't hear him coming. I need to be more aware. He has still not put down his gun that he keeps slung over his back; apparently thinking he is going to get attacked the minute he parts with it. He taps the container with his left hand (now covered with a thick glove) and the sound echoes in the empty warehouse.

"Still no sign of them?" I ask, knowing the answer, and he shakes his head in confirmation.

With a sigh, I return the small knife to its holster around my calf, then grab a hold of the ledge of the container and swing down, letting myself drop the few feet that remain. I land gracefully, in my opinion rather acing the landing, actually. The Winter Soldier watches me blankly.

"You have to be less..."

"What?" I smirk at him, and he rolls his eyes.

"Ballsy."

"Ballsy? Oh, don't be jealous." I pet him condescendingly on the shoulder and brush past him towards where the rest of our belongings are resting. "If you want, I can tell you what it's like to be ballsy."

A strong arm stops me in my tracks, grabbing me by the shoulder and spinning me around. I'm face to face with a not-so-happy-looking Winter Soldier. He studies my face, which I'm quick to cover with a fake, small smile before he can read my surprise.

"This is my mission, don't forget that, Vernut." He warns me, his voice awfully dark. "You're just one piece of a much bigger puzzle than you know."

I rip myself free of his grasp. I'm not scared of him, but my heart is pounding. I know I'm a good fighter, but I don't kid myself to think I could beat him. We've trained together enough for him to know all of my moves. It's rather comforting in a way, to not be able to be surprised by your partner.

"A rather important piece of the puzzle, don't you forget." I cockily remark, not showing him any signs of my surprise, and his eyebrows rise on his forehead. It's difficult to read his expression as he is wearing that stupid mask of his.

"That might be true, but I don't need you to finish this." He replies, keeping his tone steady as if he's talking to a slightly petulant child, who is not quite understanding what their parent is telling them.

"You're just here because..."

"Humph. I haven't met any of the Avengers, but from what I've learned, you could do with all the help you can get." I honestly tell him, cutting him off.

He watches me with a slightly odd expression, and I go to sit on the ground, legs spread out in front of me as I lean against a broken box.

"What?"

"Nothing." He shakes his head and joins me on the ground, taking his gun and placing it on his lap where he lets it rest, keeping both of his hands on top of it, always ready. He keeps his gaze straight forward, and suddenly I get the feeling that he's purposefully ignoring my eye contact.

"You might be a good killer but you're a lousy liar, you know that?" I tease him, having a feeling I'll get a reaction out of him. I'm right. As I thought.

"O- Vernut. Stop it." He looks at me, again with that weird expression.

"I will when you spit it out. Jesus." I roll my eyes at him and take out my knife to start twirling it again. "Might be easier to cut it out of you."

"You could try." He smirks for the first time I've known him. Even though I cannot see his entire face, I can tell smiling suits him.

"Hm. Wouldn't want to bruise you up before the Avengers get here. It wouldn't be a fair fight." I chuckle and he hushes, amused. "Anyway, how long are they going to be? I thought they were the earth's finest. Are they taking the subway?"

"They'll come." The Winter Soldier looks around as if he's expecting them to arrive at this second. The warehouse remains just as empty as before.

"How are you so sure?" I question him. "We might be overestimating our importance to them."

"Hydra is never wrong." The Winter Soldier replies dryly. "They'll come for us."

"Are you going to tell me the plan now, then?" I watch as the knife does a triple spin in the air.

"Yes, if you put that thing away before you poke yourself in the eye." The Winter Soldier says, keeping an eye on the knife too.

"I can still shoot a gun with one eye." I smirk, but do as I'm told. The knife returns to its home for the second time tonight. As I let go of it, I wonder what it would feel like to stick it into warm flesh. Or keep against someone's throat. My grin spreads as I imagine holding it against Maximo's throat, watching a trickle of blood make its way down her throat from where I'm pressing the knife into her skin. I'm sure it would hurt. Good. I look up to see the Winter Soldier watching me closely.

"What?" I ask him again.

"What are you thinking of?" He enquires, crossing his long legs in front of him, making a point of looking comfortable, as if he could wait all night for me to talk. I don't doubt he could.

"My knife against Maximo's throat." I say boldly, my heart fluttering slightly at the thought.

The Winter Soldier narrows his eyes at me but doesn't say anything. Why is he being so weird? That is the whole point of the mission, isn't it? To bring her in. Get justice.

"I used to fantasize about revenge, too." He slowly says, reminiscing about something. "Never as straightforward as it is in your head."

"This will be." I confidently announce, the loudness of my voice a contrast to his softer tone. He only hums.

I stay silent for a while, listening for any sounds around us. I only hear some water dripping from a pipe by the entrance. Everything else is still. I feel some adrenaline course through my body at the thought of what is to come. I sneak a look over at the Winter Soldier. He seems... sad? I frown, wondering why. He should be happy. Before the night is over we will have completed the mission.

He should be excited, like me. I can't wait. But watching him, my excitement dies down somewhat and his forlorn expression dampens my good mood.

"Who did you want revenge on?" I break the silence, my voice softer. He looks up, surprise in his eyes behind the dark hair.

For a beat, I'm convinced he's not going to answer me. His eyes gloss over with memories I can only envy.

"An old friend." He then finally says, simply, offering no further explanation.

"A friend?"

"From a long time ago." He sighs and looks out in front of him. I don't like his sadness. I look out in front of me too, watching the dark shadows play over the abandoned boxes.

"He used to call me Bucky." The Winter Soldier murmurs under his breath, and I'm not sure I heard right.

I remember our first conversation, during training. When he told me about his name. He had asked me to never use it. I had assumed it was because he was ashamed. That he was ashamed of being someone before Hydra saved him, just like they saved me. But now I can see that I was wrong. He was never ashamed. He was... is, remorseful, maybe?

"Did you -did you get your revenge?" I wonder, now honestly intrigued by this man's past. How comes he gets to have one, and I don't? I quickly banish the selfish thought. Hydra is always right.

"Yes." He says, but he sounds not the least happy about it.

"Can I ask you something?" I suddenly wonder, changing tracks, and he looks at me, waiting. "Did they use the chair on you too?"

"Yes." He answers once again, pain flashing behind his facade.

"Do you-" I struggle slightly. He waits patiently again. "Why can't I remember anything?"

"We're more efficient this way." The Winter Soldier flatly says and the words do not sound like they're his. "Trust me, after a while, this is all you'll want to remember."

I don't quite understand. What does that mean? I try to search my memory again for anything there that feels like it's truly mine, but I can't find anything. Only memories which have been told to me. Everything feels like it belongs to someone else. I don't feel any ownership of anything I know. It's such a strange sensation, and I know I would be a lot more freaked out were it not for my mission. My one thing to cling onto. Maximo. She is all I have to worry about for now. She is my sole reason, my purpose.

"So, the plan?" I return back to base, back to what I know for sure to be true.

The Winter Soldier takes a deep breath, looking down at the gun in his lap. He seems to mull my quite frankly simple question over a little too long for my liking. Just as I begin to get a grating feeling of being purposefully kept in the dark, he looks up at me, his blue eyes almost filled with guilt.

"Hydra has interfered with Stark's search for you. They know you are here. I've placed sensors by the entry points to this building, so we should get a heads up. I am expecting all of them to arrive."

"All of them?" I specify.

"Stark, Romano, Rogers, and probably Maximo, though I can't be sure. I assume they will want her to stay behind for this."

"Why?" I growl.

The Winter Soldier looks at me again with that weird look he keeps shooting me all evening and I shudder slightly, getting a little uncomfortable. It's as though he feels guilty. I don't understand why he should feel guilty. So far he's done exactly what Hydra has asked of him.

"Because of your history with her." His voice is small, unlike the voice I've come to associate with the man with hard kicks and few words.

"Hydra made me aware of ahistory. Just not quite whathistory..." I swallow, looking down at my hands. It's annoying, feeling like there's something you ought to know, something you've been a part of, something that should be crystal clear in your head, but just isn't there. But as I've been told -Hydra has its reasons, and I shall not question but obey.

"I just want you to clear your head, whatever happens with Maximo. Don't let her mess with you." The Winter Soldier brings my attention back to him, and I'm taken aback by the earnestness behind his words.

"I won't." I promise him. "I'm clear on the mission."

"Good. Anything else will only bring you pain. Believe me."

I blink, unsure again of what to say and where to go from here. I can't really remember how to have a proper conversation. The only person I can remember having a conversation with other than him is the well-kept lady with her hair in a bun, who helped me remember who I am.

"Just remember our objective. Get Maximo back to Hydra. You've been briefed on how the Avengers fight. All we need to do is take them out of the game for long enough to get Maximo." The Winter Soldier goes back to staring straight in front of him.

I watch his profile for a little while longer, wondering about what is going on inside his head. The feeling of not quite being told everything lingers in the back of my mind as much as I try to push it aside. I have to trust him. I have to trust Hydra. I do trust Hydra.

As the minutes tick by in silence, I have the urge to fiddle with my knife again, but I keep myself in check. Instead, I revise all I've been told about the Avengers, how they fight and how I should best fight them. I don't harbor any particularly strong feelings against them, but if they try to keep Maximo from me, I won't hesitate to do whatever I need to do to get through them. From the corner of my eye, I see the Winter Soldier check some device he digs from one of his pockets.

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