

## Chapter 54

The voice in my head went quiet a er that interaction and didn't return all a ernoon, no matter how much I kept expecting it to. I spend my time going through my cargo pants, finding that all of my pockets have been emptied; I have no weapons le . Not even my tiny knife. Annoying, but no matter, I can still throw a mean punch.

With nothing to do and just a weird sense of emptiness without that strange voice, I stalk around the small holding cell, feeling quite over always being locked up like an animal no matter where I am. The mission with the Winter Soldier had felt so freeing in comparison. All that open space to do what I wanted with - the fresh air... Just the fact that he treated me like an actual human being was enough for me to for the first time feel anything other than fear, confusion, and pain.

Just as I honestly feel like I am beginning to lose my sanity, the thousands of questions whirling around my skull making being confined like this unbearable and I feel my chest begin to constrict, something happens that makes me stop dead in my tracks.

A so , warm feeling spreads through my body. At first, I look down at myself in confusion, almost expecting myself to be submerged in a warm, relaxing bath. I'm not though, obviously. I'm still clad in the black clothes Hydra supplied me with, standing in Stark's very much dry cell. I look around, but nothing has changed. I'm alone, and yet it strangely feels like I'm not. My chest has forgotten that it's trying to press all of the air out of my lungs and I take long, deep breaths.

That's better.

It's that voice again, echoing in my skull. The voice is calm and the best way I can describe it is to liken it to honey. However relaxing it feels to listen to, a small pit of fear brews in me. Did the chair do more damage than I thought? Did it somehow split my personality or something, rendering me even more broken than I thought?

You're not brokenThe voice speaks again, lulling me with a sense of comfort I haven't felt before.

Great, it's a friendly split personality. Does that make me the bad one out of the two of us?

That's debatableThe voice responds to my thinking, a slight feeling of guilt washing over me.

What's happening?I look around, feeling utterly strange focusing this attention much inwards. A small wave of sadness overcomes me, and I get a strange feeling of the emotion being separate from me.

I don't knowThe voice sounds sad, a little hesitant even.

I shake my hands slightly, resuming my stalking around the cell, trying to get rid of the strange emotions of sadness and guilt I'm feeling.

Wait!I stop suddenly, a new realization overcoming me. Hydra told me about her abilities. ' Clear your head 'the Winter Soldier had warned me. Maximo .

A slight twinge of hesitation overcomes me, and now I can tell it isn't my emotion. It must be hers.

I look around again, half expecting to be met with scarlet eyes. I ball my hands into fists, ready to defend myself.

I'm sorry.The voice speaks, and I now recognize it as Maximo 's voice. She sounds small and tired, but I don't feel any sympathy.

Get out of my head, witch!I think angrily, hoping she feels my emotions just as she's forcing me to feel hers.

Livvy-

"No!" I burst out, angrily, before a feeling of panic overcomes me.

"Who -what? No, no no, I -I can't."

My chest begins to constrict again and I'm gulping in air without feeling like I'm getting any oxygen. My head feels like I'm back in the chair, trying to grasp onto anything in order to not be washed away with the current.

Maximo stays silent, it's like she was never in my head, but still, I can't calm myself down. My jaw clamps down and my hands are shaking, I'm trying so hard to cling on but my body is just too confused. Then suddenly there's a so clickand from the corner of my eye, I see the glass which has been holding me captive slide away silently.

Still breathing shallowly, but now distracted, I turn to watch where the glass wall used to be, finding nothing. I slowly and cautiously walk forward, my hands outstretched, waiting to bump into the glass. But it isn't there.

I've been let out! Somehow Stark's machinery has malfunctioned and still me out. I curiously exit the cell and find myself on the other side. I let feel the underlying panic attack rippling through me, but now it feels like I can finally breathe. I look around, wondering what to do next.

The Winter Soldier! I need to find him, free him, and then we can finally finish our mission getting to Maximo . I look around again, this time looking for any clues as to where they could be keeping him. Obviously, I find none.

I silently tiptoe out of the cold room and by pushing a heavy door, I walk into an empty, shiny hallway. I push aside comparing this hallway with the cold ones I've been dragged through too many times to count or remember back at Hydra's base. Focus.

I start walking down one end of the corridor, catching a reflection of myself as I pass a shiny door. I look tired, pale, sporting an ugly bruise on the side of my temple. My hair is still up in a now rather disheveled-looking ponytail. I look away. Focus.

I rather aimlessly walk for a little while, weirdly enough not coming into contact with anyone. It seems as though this level is deserted. A er peering through a few more doors, I finally hit the jackpot.

I swing the door open and am met with a similar room and cell as the one I was in, except this one is occupied by the Winter Soldier. I close the door carefully behind me and approach silently.

As silent as I am, his enhancements make him look up. He's been stripped of his mask. What's more concerning though, is the way his metal arm has been yanked up behind him at a weird angle, the metal plates tightly held in place by a machine looking like a giant clamp, forcing him to kneel on the ground. How long has he been forced to stay like this?

I approach silently, his pale eyes following my movements closely, no emotion on his face at me being here. He looks much more beaten down compared to just last night when we were talking in the warehouse before the fighting. And when I say beaten down I don't mean physically. There's tiredness behind his eyes which wasn't there before.

"How do I get you out?" I ask him.

"I don't know. How did you get out?" He replies in a similar curt tone as me.

"I don't know." I confess.

We fall silent, him just staring at me and me trying to look around to see if there's any way of opening the doors. There's a keypad that I assume would do the trick if I only knew the code.

"Are you alright?" The Winter Soldier suddenly asks, making me look up, surprised by his tone of voice.

"I -yes." I reply, slightly uncertainly. He frowns, looking at me like he isn't quite believing me. "The mission?"

He blinks a couple of times, and then he's blank again, cold. I watch him confused. What is going on? Did the Avengers' mind tricks work on him? Surely not.

"Finish it." He finally says.

"But you-" I begin, but am cut o .

"We are expendable, remember? We serve a purpose, and when we can't do that, we're expendable. I can't serve a purpose here." He says, indicating his cell. "You." He nods at me. "Can."

I hesitate. I know he's right, of course he is. But leaving him here doesn't sit right with me. Despite my emotions being completely bulldozed by the chair, I can't help but feel something akin to mutual understanding when it comes to the Winter Soldier. Maybe I see something of myself in him, or maybe it's because he's the only person in the world that I know who knows what I've gone through, but I just can't seem to leave him literally hanging like this.

"No." He breaks my train of thought as though he is privy to it. "First Maximo . Find her."

I open my mouth, wanting to argue, but all it takes is a shake of his head for me to finally relent and obey.

"Where do I find her?" I ask.

"Probably somewhere in a medical bay. I heard you hurt her pretty bad." He says, watching me intently, no emotion behind his words.

I frown as a vague, fuzzy memory returns of a knife the feeling of warm blood on my hand and green eyes holding an emotion I cannot quite place.

"Find her and it'll make sense." The Winter Soldier says, never missing a beat, his pale eyes drilling holes into me and I get the feeling again of him knowing something I don't.

I nod curtly, and with that, he is le to watch me leave. I, again, walk through the hallway hesitantly without a clear sense of where I am going. I finally happen upon a small staircase by chance, and figure I might as well start climbing as there isn't even an option for me to go down.

I don't know what keeps me climbing, but I climb for what feels like minutes upon minutes upon minutes. Maybe it's the feeling of tiring myself out, feeling the burn in my lungs and my thighs a er being cooped up for such extended periods of time, but I just keep going. I lose track of counting how many stories I've climbed somewhere past 37.

That same feeling that has kept me climbing finally tells me it's time to stop. Well, it may also be the fact that I physically cannot seem to li my feet up anymore that also finally forces me to stop, panting for air, my body covered in a fine layer of sweat. I lean against the rough wall, catching my breath.

Shit, I need to work out more.

Satisfied enough with my recovery, I push the bar on the door in front of me which causes the door to swing open. Again, there's no one in this hallway. It's almost rather strange. I was expecting alarms to go o when I was let out of my cell, but maybe I'm not as important as I thought. At the very least I was expecting to bump into someone

I slowly walk through this hallway, my boots so ly tapping on the clean floor. This hallway has the occasional window through which I can see New York City pan out underneath the building. We must be in Stark's preposterous tower.

The doors I pass are numbered with small plaques. I open a few, coming upon what to my surprise are empty examination rooms, not quite unlike the one I frequented at Hydra. I feel uneasy, but I push aside that feeling. Feelings are selfish, and I cannot a ord to be selfish now that I am serving a purpose greater than myself.

At the end of the hallway, I decide to try the last door on the le , figuring that soon, I might have to give up and find a way out of Stark's maze and return to Hydra empty-handed, even though the possibility of punishment for my failure is more than likely. That way at least I can come back fresh, and with weapons and try to find Maximo again.

I place my hand on the cool door handle and push the door slowly open. The room is another medical room, except much bigger, and this room isn't empty.

The bed in the middle of the room is occupied by a small figure covered by light covers. I peer in slightly more curiously, watching the figure's steady breathing. Then, as if in slow motion, my eyes are pulled upwards towards the head of the person, and I'm met with the pale, sleeping face of Wanda Maximo .

I freeze. I wasn't expecting -never mind, here's my opportunity! I watch her for a moment, realizing that she's fast asleep, her breathing slow and steady and her face pale as the pillows behind her, but relaxed. I sneak in silently as a ghost, closing the door behind me with the so est little click!

Maximo is hooked up into an IV, but other than that and the fact that she's sickly pale, she looks alive enough. I wonder what I managed to do to her. I don't dwell on trying to recount though, as I'm finding that trying to make my brain recall things it just can't is more confusing than it is helpful.

A heart monitor supplies the silent room with a steady beeping, which I feel should be loud enough to wake Maximo , but she snoozes on blissfully. I sneak a little closer, feeling braver a er not having woken her up when I closed the door. She's lying on her back, her head having turned slightly to the right on the flu y pillows behind her. She looks small on the bed, but I'm imagining anyone looks small in a hospital bed. Still though, being this close to her, I don't know why I'm so taken aback by how non-threatening she looks. I know looks are deceiving -especially in this case, what with all the magic brewing just underneath her pale skin, waiting to burn anyone who dares cross her path.

Her eyebrows furrow slightly in worry but smoothen out quickly again. She must be dreaming. I look around me. I need a weapon of some sort. I make my way carefully towards the wall of white cupboards on the side of the room and open a drawer silently. Just bandages. The next one is filled with clear bottles. The third one finally supplies me with a tiny, but e cient enough blade.

Even more confidently now, I turn back around towards Maximo . She's still sleeping.

I bite my lower lip and edge towards her again. I'm trying to fit together the image I have of Maximo with this image in front of me of an ill woman who looks like she might have trouble fighting o a ten-year-old. I stop just next to her bed, looking down at her, not quite knowing what to do. Maximo moves slightly, frowning again.

My heart's thumping.

I can't overthink this. I've been given very clear orders. Bring Maximo back. She deserves everything that's coming to her. I lean forward and so ly place the blade against the so , exposed skin on her throat. I press it against her throat slightly more forcefully, the pressure waking her up.

She bats her eyes, confused, before she realizes it's standing right over her. Her eyes widen in surprise before they flit down to my hand and the blade, then back up to meet my eyes. Her body is now completely still, the heart monitor beeping quickly now.

She's scared. Good.

"Don't make a sound, witch. You're coming with me." I whisper to her, warning her, and for good measure, I press the blade down against her throat slightly more and she whimpers so ly as I see the tiniest of scarlet droplets emerge underneath the cold steel.

A/N: Thank you all again for reading, voting, and commenting! Heart heart heart you.