Chapter 66

When the roaring wind around me finally settles and I feel heavy again, I slowly dare open my eyes, squinting at first, not used to my new surroundings. I still feel like I'm spinning, but I am standing on my two feet, steadily on the ground. The weight of Maximo 's limp body is heavy against my back, but nevertheless, I cling on to her not quite unlike a leopard clings to its prey as it drags it up a tree, scared if I let go I might continue spinning to never stop.

I'm not quite sure why, but even now as my surroundings are supposed to have stopped spinning, they still do It all makes me feel like I have been drinking. The tell-tale feeling of nausea just sitting in the back of my throat makes itself known, and I feel rather wobbly. I am not sure if this is just a side-effect from whatever I just experienced or if I am actually drunk. I frown, shaking my heavy head, trying to clear it. It feels like there is a heavy, thick fog inside of my brain, and yet I feel completely clear-headed. I blink again, shapes and shadows finally taking form around me. I am standing in what seems like to be a rather large, dark warehouse, the only source of light in the structure a few brave fluorescent tubes that look like they have been hanging from the ceiling for longer than I have been alive.

There's a sudden loss of pressure around my forearm as Agatha suddenly lets go of me and I almost flinch at the gesture, having nearly forgotten all about her. The woman looks pale, like she's just excessed a vast amount of energy in a short amount of time, yet her eyes shine excitedly under her heavy eyebrows.

"Welcome back to the now." She says amicably, looking around, the movement making her curly hair bounce. "Hmm, looks like we're a little early."
Agatha looks back at me with a trace of an expression I cannot decipher, and even if I wanted to, she gives me no time before she plasters on a wide smile, her eyes trailing somewhere to the right of my head, where I assume Maximo 's head lies.

"Put her down by those boxes over there." Agatha orders and I don't even have the time to process her words before my body automatically moves to comply.

I place Maximo 's body down where I was told to. She slumps down with a muffled thud. I place her with her back against the heavy wooden boxes, her head rolling to the side again, her now messy braid having come undone almost entirely. Without thinking, I push some of her hair away from her face, a gesture of care that contradicts the careless way I've dropped her down on the ground. A dark bruise is already forming on the side of her face my gun hit. Maximo 's eyebrows furrow slightly and a small, indistinguishable noise escapes her lips. She is coming to.

Feeling Agatha's eyes upon me, watching me closely, I straighten out and take a step away from Maximo , standing rigidly next to Agatha again.

"You know, we're really friends, you and me." Agatha suddenly says and I look up at her, surprised, and feeling quite the opposite for some reason. "Ultimately, we want the same thing."

"What is that?" My voice is flat, emotionless, matching the way I feel.

"Her-" Agatha nods towards Maximo , who is groaning, her face scrunched up in pain. "to answer for what she's done."
I open my mouth to question what exactly Agatha means, because as far as I'm concerned, as long as Hydra reclaim Maximo , I'm happy. Maybe that's what Agatha wants as well? Before I get to voice my question though, a small voice cuts through the silence.

"Livvy?" I look down at Maximo , who looks rather out of it still, clearly trying to understand where she is now by the look of it.

"Here. Put these on her." Agatha suddenly makes a pair of dark, slick handcuffs appear from inside her dark robe.

I accept the cuffs and move silently towards Maximo . The cuffs aren't like anything I've seen before; dark and heavy with a green, blinking light on each cuff. They're not even connected to one another. Maximo , however, seems to have encountered the cuffs before. As her confused eyes see the cuffs nearing, some fear mixes into those green pupils of hers.

I crouch down in front of the woman, taking a hold of one of her slight wrists. She's still reeling from the blow, but does try to resist as best she can by trying to pull her hand out of my grasp. Unfortunately for her, though, I easily yank her hand towards me and clip the first cuff around her wrist. It fits snugly, and as soon as it clicks around her wrist the green light turns red, and I can almost distinguish an almost familiar hum in the air.

"Livvy, please don't-" The witch lamely tries as I extend my other hand for hers.

I look at her face. It feels almost rude to behold her face which inhabits so many emotions as I feel exactly none. I look at her for a moment. Trying to understand, perhaps. There is so much there. Her eyes are welling up, but I don't think it is due to the pain in her temple. This is some other pain that I'm not privy to. For a split second, I feel myself almost wishing to know, but then the fleeting feeling is gone, and I feel my fingers close around Maximo 's other wrist. She doesn't fight me this time, but slackly her arm lies on my thighs as I prepare the other cuff.

"I know you're in there." Maximo chokes out as the other cuff clips shut around her pale wrist, the pure blackness of the cuff almost painfully juxtaposing the pale skin underneath. Red light. I meet Maximo 's eyes again. That same weird feeling of wanting to know more returns, but is promptly cut short.

"Come back here." Agatha's voice is curt.

Again, almost as though my muscles need not be told what to do, they obey before my brain has a chance to process the words and suddenly I am standing next to the dark-haired witch anew. The distance between myself and Maximo makes the red-haired witch look small, her frame slight, hunched against those wooden crates. She looks from me onto Agatha, her expression changing, growing dark.

"Agatha-" She begins, but the witch next to me tuts loudly, drowning out Maximo 's next words and she closes her mouth, her eyes steely, the green in them no longer vulnerable, but looking more poisonous by the second.

"There we go. Less talking, more listening, my dear Wanda." Agatha chirpily says, the sight in front of her apparently akin to that of an enormous present underneath a Christmas tree. "You know, I don't quite like being played for a fool."
"I di-" Agatha tuts loudly and obnoxiously again, forcing Maximo 's lips shut again.

"All I've done is try to help you, dear."

"Help?" Maximo raises her hands in front of her, showing the cuffs and their happy little red lights.

"Well, that's just a precaution. I didn't quite care for being slammed into the rocks like last time, and I definitely am sick and tired of Agnes." Agatha laughs hollowly. "You can be quite cruel, you know?"
"I didn't-" Maximo begins, but this time, she isn't cut off by Agatha. She just cannot seem to find the words, and so she goes silent, a tear slowly rolling down her cheek. "I'm tired."

"Of what, Wanda?" Agatha presses on, but Maximo only shakes her head, looking down at her cuffs. "I do envy you."
Maximo looks up, but doesn't respond. Her eyes flit to me for a second before she looks back at Agatha.

"You've been good at playing the victim, from the very start." Agatha slowly says.

"Agatha, please." Maximo sighs, her voice cracking mid-sentence.

"No. You don't get to ask me for anything, Wanda. I tried to help you, but there's no helping you. All I can do now is look out for myself. I'm done." Agatha's voice is as stern as I've heard it so far.

Maximo doesn't argue. She sinks further down, her lips parting slightly, trembling. It looks like she's barely holding herself together.

I frown, watching Maximo . She isn't behaving as I had assumed she would. I can't quite - I shake my head once more, willing the fogginess to disappear from inside it. What on earth is happening to me?

"Yoohoo?" Agatha's loud voice pierces through my train of thought and I take a deep inhale and look at her. She's examining me closely, no doubt catching onto something not being quite right with me.

"Yes?" I grumble, oddly enough feeling slightly annoyed at her. The feeling's very muted, but it's there.

"I told you to go fetch our guests from outside. They're arriving. It's not like me not to show them a warm welcome." Agatha dazzles with a smile.

"Guests?" I frown, casting a quick glance at Maximo . I haven't forgotten about my first and only mission. "What guests?"

"Oh, you're old pals. Now be a doll and go meet them." Agatha shoos me away with her hands, looking at me expectantly.

I turn on my heels and walk towards where a large sliding door is sitting slightly ajar. I hear Agatha mutter something behind me but I don't turn around, being too preoccupied with my curiosity towards these guests of Agatha's. My footsteps echo against the concrete floor of the warehouse as I make my way, walking at a slight angle, still feeling the effects of alcohol in my system for some reason. Could that be the culprit behind my odd memory loss? My brain aches at my trying to recollect. But all I come up with is being with Hydra, the Winter Soldier, and my mission going south, being held captive in Stark Tower, Maximo ... Maximo ...

You can do it. Remember me. I almost jolt to a stop by the sudden voice in my head that doesn't belong. Please remember me Livvy.

My jaw tightens, ignoring her. I had forgotten about her rather intrusive habit. Bloody witches. The sooner I can finish my mission and be done with the both of them the better. I stop by the sliding doors and cast a glance back at said two witches. Agatha's back is turned towards me, but I catch Maximo 's eye, which makes me promptly turn away, the weird feeling returning which I can't name.

It's dusk outside. I step out, looking around. As far as the eye can see, we're somewhere in the countryside. There's a lone dirt road leading up to the warehouse, an army of pine trees on the horizon, and nothing but fields as the eye can see. The sky is a light rose color, the bright orange sun setting to my right. I squint, noting a disturbance in the horizon. A cloud of dust. A moment later I spot the origin of the cloud. A caravan of cars is tearing down the dirt road, sending up a huge cloud of yellow in its wake. I count seven cars. My stomach twists uncomfortably and I go to grasp the gun from where it's been comfortably sitting against the small of my back. Agatha did say I knew whoever is in those cars. She also said our goal was the same. Nonetheless, I don't quite trust the witch. Can you blame me?

I wait patiently for another couple of minutes as the cars get bigger and now louder too. I feel slightly placated now that I at least am holding my gun. It hangs loosely from my right hand by my side. The cars finally rev up to the sandy lot in front of the lone warehouse. I squint as the dust cloud descends upon me. The car doors open and men in black suits and men in full tactical gear alike jump out. I squeeze the gun tighter. None of them seem the slightest worried about its presence, nor mine for that matter. The men with guns scour their surroundings while the men in suits crowd around one of the cars in the middle. The back door opens and my innards go icy.

"Nice to see you again." The woman says as she smoothens out her navy dress.

It's her. She's older than when I saw her last, but it's her. Her appearance is just as well-kept as the last time I saw her, her brown hair still in her signature bun. The aura of superiority radiates off of her even twenty feet away.

"Y-you." That is all I can stammer out, my brain coming to a complete stand-still.

"Well done, soldat." The woman says, walking towards me, followed by the men in suits. "She's in there?"
"Sh- Maximo ?"
"Yes. That was your mission after all, was it not?" The woman is now right in front of me, just an arm's length away.

"How did-" I begin, but trail off, not sure what my question is meant to be.

"There's time for all of that later." The woman says, her tone almost believably friendly, were it not for her cold eyes staring straight into my soul. "Take me to her. Now."

"Yes, ma'am." I nod, her authoritativeness enough to cut through any uncertainty growing in me.

I turn on my heels again, walking back into the cool warehouse, my steps this time echoed by a dozen other feet. Agatha spins around, but Maximo doesn't even look up. She's still slumped against the wooden crates, her head hanging limply from her shoulders. For a moment I wonder if she's unconscious.

"Agatha." The well-kept woman greets the dark-haired witch as they exchange a kiss on the cheek like old friends.

"Strucker."

Any doubt I had of Maximo being unconscious disappears as Agatha's greeting reaches her ears. She flinches visibly and her head slowly lifts, revealing her pale face, the dark bruise on the side of her face having darkened quite quickly. Maximo stares at the woman in front of her as the woman lets go of Agatha and turns to face Maximo . I watch the interaction closely, myself trying to figure out how come the name Strucker rings a bell.

"And Wanda -you still go by Wanda, don't you? What a pleasure it is to see you again." The woman Agatha referred to as Strucker says, seemingly genuinely pleased to see Maximo , completely ignoring how they've come to meet.

Maximo , on the other hand, does not seem to share even an ounce of that pleasure. Her eyes are wide, an almost wild, crazy look in them. Her head shakes ever so slightly from left to right, as if she isn't believing what she's seeing.

"No." She whispers, pushing herself flatter against the wood behind her, trying to get as far away from Strucker as possible.

"I know, it's a shock to see me. With everything going on with you I can hardly fault you for forgetting about me!" Strucker laughs what I can only assume she thinks is a friendly, light laugh. "How you've changed since last, little witch!"

Maximo visibly tenses at those words, her eyes starting to burn a fiery red. I instantly react, clicking the safety off my gun and pointing it towards the witch. The men behind me follow suit a few seconds after me. Maximo doesn't flinch, her eyes still trained on Strucker in fear. Strucker does not seem the least shaken. She lazily raises a hand, telling everyone to hold off. I lower my gun just a little, not quite sharing the woman's confidence in Maximo not being able to do any damage.

"Do you think these will stop me?" Maximo regains her voice, and some of her confidence, nodding towards her wrists.

"Oh honey, I think they will. Look closely, I'm rather proud of the new little update I could contribute with." Agatha pipes up.
Maximo frowns and looks down at the cuffs on her wrists. Her lips part slightly in surprise and she looks back up, looking genuinely worried for the first time. I would almost feel sorry for her, pressed away against those wooden crates like she is, surrounded by at least twenty guns aimed straight at her chest, but I can't quite bring myself to it, watching her red eyes angrily warn us to back away.

"I must say, I was pretty pleased with my little stroke of genius there. Runes, on the cuffs! Would ya believe it!?" Agatha almost jumps on the spot in excitement.

Maximo does look rather defeated for a second, but before she manages to get a word in Agatha speaks again.

"Soldat. Vernut, or whatever they like to call you. Come here." Agatha says and I silently obey, walking up to her, feeling everyone's eyes on me.

Agatha places a hand on my shoulder as I stop next to her. Her fingernails dig into me and she pulls me closer to her, making me slightly stumble, taken aback by the force in her grasp. Maximo slowly comes to stand, her eyes never leaving Agatha and me. Agatha stands slightly behind me and from the corner of my eye I see her lift a hand and a thin wisp of purple escapes her long fingers. The purple travels towards my throat and I feel the heat from it, the skin on my throat feeling like it's being stung by a million tiny nettles. I squirm uncomfortably, but the magic keeps me in place.

"And if the cuffs fail..." Agatha speaks into my ear and Maximo takes a step forward, making Agatha pull me backward. "Oh, no, you don't, darling."

Maximo freezes, the red in her eyes fading away, leaving nothing but deep green and fear. She looks like she can't make her mind up whether she should run or fight, her legs slightly quivering. The sight of her like that makes something lurch in the back of my mind as if I've just almost remembered something important I'd forgotten. Maximo meets my eyes, as if she felt it too.

"Let her go. I won't ask again." Maximo growls, her eyes beginning to glow red again as she readies herself.

"Alright, Agatha, I'm sure there is no need for any of that. Please let her go." The Strucker woman commands as if Agatha has bored her with her show.

The stinging around my neck eases and I push Agatha off me. Add that to the list of why I hate witches.

"Alright. Vernut. Here." Strucker speaks and instantly I turn towards her without even thinking.

I feel almost humiliated like I am nothing but a dog that only knows how to obey. But even despite my lamentation, I do obey and walk up to the woman. She looks me up and down, slowly, taking me in. I feel oddly like she is judging something, but what, I'm not so sure. Then, she smiles a kind of smile that makes her look like she's not quite sure how to smile but read about it in a book a while ago.

"You've made me proud. I wasn't sure-"
"You shouldn't be." Maximo interrupts, but the woman only shoots her a bored glance before she continues.

"I wasn't sure if you would deliver, but you did. With or without Agatha's help here, I don't care. What matters is I have what I want." The woman snaps her fingers, extending her hand out.

Without delay, one of the men in suits approaches her and presses something into her hand before he silently backs away.

"One more thing I need you to do." Strucker says, handing me what looks like a dark collar. "Put this on her."

I look down at the collar in my hands. It's rough, with a small metal box sticking out of it. There is a green light blinking which looks suspiciously like the one I saw on the cuffs I placed on Maximo earlier. When I look back up at Strucker, she's watching me curiously. But again, as though I have no choice but to comply, I idly turn towards where Maximo is standing.

Although I want nothing less than to approach the witch, I do. She doesn't make a move to stop me. Her green eyes simply follow my movements. When I am standing right in front of her I stop and lift the collar up towards her neck.

I glance at her face, her expression oddly enough making me have to look away and focus on my hands. I brush her hair away and take a step closer, having to lean in to see to it that I attach the collar on properly. It's very snug, and I struggle slightly.

"It's okay." Maximo breathes so quietly I almost don't catch it as I click the collar on and the light switches to red.

I slowly pull away from her, my hands still on the collar, our faces mere inches apart. I feel my fingers tremble as my body struggles, just as Maximo 's did a second ago, between its flight and fight reflex. I meet Maximo 's eyes again, which are now filled with... not the fear I expected, but an odd calm.

She almost smiles at me, a smile so small you wouldn't see it were you anywhere but where I am standing right now. Where I am, I clearly see the sides of her mouth lift ever so slightly, almost like she's trying to tell me it's fine. It's okay. I frown, never having felt more confused or at odds with myself.

Out of the blue two men in tactical gear are standing on either side of me. Before I even have the chance to blink, I see one of them drive in a shiny needle into the side of Maximo 's neck, right below the collar. The other man must've done the same to me, as I feel a sharp pain in the side of my neck.

Confused, I flail around before the man removes the needle, holding onto me tightly as I quickly begin to lose control of all my muscles, everything going warm and soft at the same time. I lock eyes with Maximo again, who is already halfway down towards the floor, the man behind her holding onto her awkwardly. My vision quickly goes blurry.

It's okay. I love you.

I don't know if that last thought is mine, or someone else's. My vision goes black and I hear myself fall onto the floor. Then I cannot even hold onto sound and I am in complete stillness before my grasp of my consciousness also eludes me and there is nothing of me anymore.

A/N: You didn't think I would leave you on the edge of your seats on Christmas, would you??? I totally would, not going to lie, but I think you deserve a present, so here it is, from me to you with gratitude, as always <3

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