

[seven] ping-pong bets

AFTER RETURNING THE RENTAL CAR, Peter took Nova back to his house. Although she was worried about Charles and Hank, being with Peter provided her with an odd sense of calm, which was ironic considering the kid was so hyperactive that it made Nova's head spin every time he moved too fast.

Instead of racing through the door like he usually would and making himself at home in the basement, Peter took the time to unlock the door and let Nova enter the house before him. Now that she wasn't blinded by the tunnel-vision of having more pressing matters on her mind, she took the time to fully appreciate the Maximo's house.

Pictures lined the walls in the hallway, each one depicting a different scene. Most of them were of Peter and his sisters, but some had his mother in them, all four of them smiling at the camera. Their happiness in the photos, frozen forever as a memory to look back on, brought a smile to Nova's face.

"Peter?" called a voice. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, mom," Peter replied. "I, uh, I brought a friend. Is that okay?"

"A friend?" asked Magda Maximo, appearing through a doorway with a dish towel in her hands. "Oh, you're the girl that was with the cops."

"They weren't cops, mom," Peter said. "This is Nova."

"It's nice to meet you, Nova," Magda said with a smile, shaking Nova's hand. "I'm Magda. Make yourself at home."

"Thank you," Nova replied. "You have a lovely house."

"Thank you, sweetheart," she smiled, looking at Peter. "Dinner's in an hour."

"Alright," he said. "We'll be in the basement."

As he grabbed Nova's hand, presumably to avoid any more conversation with his mother, a cry from the top of the stairs made Nova jump.

"Petey!"

A little girl in a princess dress ran down the stairs and barrelled straight into Peter's arms. He caught her and lifted her off the ground, laughing. "Hello, trouble."

He somehow managed to get the girl upside down in his arms so that she was dangling by her legs. She shrieked with laughter and looked up at her brother. "Upsy-downs!"

Peter chuckled. "Yeah. Lorna, this is my friend Nova."

He put his sister down on the floor and she straightened up, turning to Nova. After a tense few seconds in which she scrutinised her, Lorna finally smiled. "Nova. Pretty name."

"Thank you," Nova replied.

"I'm Lorna," Lorna said proudly. "Peter's favourite sister."

"Are you now?" Nova asked. "Well, it's a pleasure to meet you, Peter's favourite sister."

Lorna giggled. "I like your hair. Can you make mine like that?"

Peter cleared his throat awkwardly. "Hey, Lorna, why don't you go upstairs and bug Wanda?"

"But she bugs me," Lorna protested.

Peter sent his sister a pointed look. "Lorna."

"Alright, alright," she groaned. "I'm going," she stomped back up the stairs. "You're boring."

Peter turned to Nova. "Sorry about her."

"It's okay," Nova replied. "You didn't have to tell her to go away."

"Believe me, she'd get annoying in approximately three minutes," Peter said. "Come on, basement's this way."

Nova followed Peter down into his basement, fully taking in what she was seeing. All manner of stolen goods filled the room, with boxes upon boxes of various chocolates and candies stacked against one wall. She pointed them out to Peter as he made himself at home on the couch.

"You a fan of those?" she asked.

"Yeah, help yourself," Peter replied. "I have to eat a lot, you see, because I run so much and use so much energy that I just eat and eat and eat, but feel free to eat something if you're hungry. Just don't take the Lemonheads. They're my favourites."

"I'm actually alright," Nova said, sitting down on the couch beside Peter. "This is a pretty cool basement."

"It's the coolest," Peter agreed. "Hey, you wanna play ping-pong? I warn you, I'm pretty good."

"Only if you don't cheat," Nova said.

"Like I would dare?" Peter said, feigning offence.

Nova laughed. "Alright, one game."

"Five games," Peter bartered.

"Three games," Nova replied. "Winner gets... I don't know, the winner gets whatever they want."

"That's a steep price to pay if you lose," Peter said. "I could ask you to run naked down the street and you'd have to do it."

Nova picked up a ping-pong paddle. "But you won't do that because you're a nice guy."

"I don't know, public embarrassment has always amused me," Peter shrugged, tossing the ping-pong ball into the air and catching it.

"Alright, ready?"

They played for nearly an hour, until they were tied in the last game. It had reached a winner-takes-all situation, with each of them claiming a victory from the past two games. Whoever won this game would be the overall victor.

As Nova returned the ball to Peter, he let out a loud, "BOO!" as he returned the ball and Nova, who had jumped in surprise at Peter's sudden outburst, missed the ball completely and heard it bounce on the floor behind her.

She frowned. "That's not fair. You cheated."

"I didn't see you laying down any rules that said I couldn't distract you," Peter pointed out. "So it's not cheating."

"Fine," Nova sighed. "You win. What do you want as a prize?"

Peter's form blurred as he whizzed around the room. When he finally stopped, he held out a box of Twinkies to Nova. "I want you to let me take you on a date."

"A date?" Nova asked, eyeing the box of Twinkies. "You only just met me."

"Exactly," Peter replied. "And I already like you, and I won ping-pong, so you technically can't say no."

"This seems like coercion," Nova said, but she took the box of Twinkies nonetheless. "Alright, fine, I'll go on a date with you."

"Great," Peter grinned. "Rematch?"

"Nope," Nova replied. "I don't want to face defeat again."

Peter laughed. "Someone's a sore loser."

"Not really," Nova replied. "I got a box of Twinkies out of it."

"And a date with a super cute guy," Peter added.

Nova raised her eyebrows at Peter. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

Even though he was the one that brought on the compliment, Peter's face turned red. "Thanks."

"Aww, is someone a little flustered?" Nova teased.

Peter shook his head. "Me? Flustered? No way. Never."

Nova laughed. "Alright, tough guy. I believe you."

"Peter!" his mother called from upstairs. "Dinner's ready!"

"Coming!" he shouted back, turning to Nova. "She's made enough for you. I went and checked."

"When?" Nova asked.

"Between matches," Peter replied with a shrug. "Come on."

In the end, Nova spent the night at the Maximo house, after Magda discovered that she lived in New York and her father wasn't home. She was introduced to Peter's other sister, Wanda, and got along quite well with her. She even shared Wanda's room for the night, because it felt like sharing with Peter would be pushing the limits of hospitality just a little bit.

When Charles, Logan and Hank picked Nova up from the Maximo house after their mission failed catastrophically, they found her to be in high spirits, elated at the prospect of going on a date with the silver-haired speedster who had found a place in her heart and refused to leave.

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