

Chapter Fifty-Two: The Drums Of War

Maria split up with Fiona shortly after the Marine team came to escort her off, and to the Unicorn's amusement, her military entourage guided her to a pretty sleek black private jet.

She hummed as she boarded the vehicle, settling into one of the very comfy white seats inside; the interior setup was something out of a movie.

Her silver irises moved to the single military personnel that sat across from her; besides the pilot, he was the only one that had joined her.

The African American man was decorated in a formal military outfit with metals and rainbow bars peppering random locations that only told Maria he was someone important.

His solid frame and strong face instantly put Maria on guard, and he was well over eight inches taller than her, which didn't help with his stern appearance. The man gave off the intense vibes of the strict military father.

A sharp shiver ran down her spine as the vehicle's warm temperature began to ease the chill she'd experienced from the harsh assaulting weather outside. "Dammit ... why's it so friggin' cold in Montana ... shit..."

He didn't respond right away, coolly observing her.

"Eh ... so..." Maria cleared her throat before crossing her legs; her vision moved to the empty seats. "Wussup with me getting the fancy ride while my homies get those huge ass birds? Ah, yo, that uniform, too—expectin' to go to a party or somethin' 'cause, uh—yeah, I ain't got a dress, ya know?" She joked with a forced laugh.

The man calmly folded his hands across his lap, face as serious as she'd expect out of someone dressed for the occasion. "My name is Master Sergeant Zawnté Clay, and I have been tasked with overseeing your itinerary for the next few days."

"Woah," Maria leaned back in her seat with a small smirk, "okay, okay ... so, you're some bigshot. How did you get stuck with Unicorn detail, hehe?"

Clay's eyebrow twitched. "I don't think you understand the level of security clearance you've been granted, Ms. Espinar. To put it bluntly, you will be making statements and appearing before millions, if not hundreds of millions of people, and your words will be carried throughout the world."

A lump dropped down Maria's throat as she averted her eyes, releasing another forced chuckle. "Damn ... kill joy, shit. Okay, got it, got it ... yeah, the whole spark of hope thing that general dude was talkin' about..."

"General Tom Dallas," Clay articulately stated, "has tasked me with your safety and to prepare you for the burden ahead of you."

"Nice..." Maria groaned, tone speaking volumes.

A frown touched the man's dark eyes as the jet prepared to take off, and the pilot asked them to strap in through the speakers. They both complied, and the plane moved to the runway.

"Do you know what you will be doing or why you are on this plane?"

Maria shrugged, glancing at the window as they flew down the strip, and she could feel the weight of their rapid acceleration press against her chest. "Healing people, talkin' on camera ... sound about right?"

"More than that..."

Clay sighed, waiting for them to stabilize in the air before continuing.

Maria happily basked in the sound of the jet as they took to the air, but as was all good things, the man's silence didn't last, and his deep voice returned.

“We will be making a short stop in Seattle to meet someone, and there are a lot of victims from the Vampire attack, among other things that you will be helping with.”

“Mmh?” Maria’s lips brightened. “What kind of people we gettin’? They know how to crack a joke, huh? ... ¡Porque, maldita sea, estás rígido!”

[*Because, damn, you’re stiff!*]

“... Some of the people that General Dallas contacted in order to meet your demands, and that is why we are in this jet.”

“Oh ... you talkin’ about those big business types? Hmm ... I can smell the green; aye, yo, lighten up, Tipo! We’ll have a good time, you’ll see!”

[*Dude*]

“All I know is that they are people the General knew would be interested in doing business with you.”

“Sweet. Yeah, I’m down with that. So, uh—how long ‘till we get there?” Maria asked, bending down to check one of the cupboards. She was growing a bit exasperated by his full-on business-type attitude.

“Not long. This jet travels close to the speed of sound.”

“Ooh, crazy!” Maria took out a bag of potato chips inside before popping the seal and helping herself. “Okay—what happens after we do all that stuff?”

“You’ll meet with a news station in Oregon before we head to California, where you’ll heal more people in hospitals and relief shelters, do another interview, and then we’ll go from there.”

“Not much of an—itinerary,” Maria commented, popping chips into her mouth. “By the way, uh—that means like a plan, right?”

“Yes ... things might be changed, depending on how the interview turns out.”

“Huh ... well, okay.”

Maria groaned when the pilot said they could take off their seat belts, using the opportunity to shrug off her thick coat.

She pulled at the front of her shirt, releasing some of the tension on her chest that the soldier was causing; the icy flower between her breasts shifted a little. On Fiona’s suggestion, she’d cut some of her hair and wound it around the object to act as a sort of necklace since her white-lilac locks seemed to suppress the flower.

Clay shifted his posture, crossing his legs while glaring at her; Maria was growing more than a little annoyed with the man, and she tried focusing on her chips to distract herself, but it didn’t help for long.

“Aye, what?” She snapped. “Got a problem?”

“What shouldn’t you talk about?”

Wiping her fingers on her dark gray sweats, Maria scratched the side of her head with irritation. “I ain’t stupid ... I know I ain’t supposed to mention the whole crystal thing.”

The man didn’t flinch. “What else?”

Maria’s jaw snapped shut, and she leaned to the side with a sour expression. The man didn’t elaborate. “The hell you mean, *what else?* That’s it. Don’t spill the beans on the whole other world shit.”

“How did you know I knew of that event?” Clay calmly asked.

Maria’s eyebrows shot up. “Eh...”

Damn ... shit.

“You didn’t, but assumed I did, correct?”

Her lips fell into a grimace. “Aye, that’s playin’ dirty ... yeah, okay, I did just assume it. Do you know...”

“I do ... what would you have done if I didn’t?”

“Son of a bitch!” Maria’s tongue pressed against her teeth as she scratched her cheek, took a deep breath, and expelled it in a hiss. “You caught me slippin’ ... okay, it won’t happen again.” She reached around her left shoulder to shift her bra strap. “Damn ... tryin’ ta trip me up and shit...”

“Do you think those news anchors or reporters will go easy on you?”

“... aye, I get your point.”

“Where did you come from?”

“... An airport.”

“Which?”

“... Shit, I don’t know the name of the damn place,” Maria growled, running her hand through her hair. “Damn, what’s up with all the questions?”

Clay was notably frustrated. “You aren’t getting what I’m saying, Ms. Espinar. Do you not think you will be asked these questions?”

“Aye, okay—but it’s not like I’m gonna snitch, okay! I don’t know why you don’t think I can keep my mouth shut? Look ... I ain’t goin’ to blow the lid, got it?”

“Tell me about your brother.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

“... Fine, okay—another test, huh? Uh ... he’s got a big heart, ya know? He be checkin’ up on all the folks and—I don’t know, he’s my lil’ hermono. What do ya wanna know? Damn, be gettin’ all personal and shit...”

“What kind of questions do you think they’re going to ask you?”

“Uh,” Maria sucked on her lower lip as she thought about it. “Like ... what’s it like bein’ a Unicorn, or, eh ... yo, how many people you healin’. Right? How the hell should I know?”

“Exactly ... what do you think the purpose of a news organization is in today’s world?”

Maria lifted an eyebrow. “... News, duh ... it’s in the name, Tipo.”

[Dude]

Clay slowly shook his head. “News organizations are businesses ... they are in the business of netting their station or site *views* or *clicks*. What’s the best way to get that, reporting boring facts about a situation? No ... you need to be very careful about how you respond.”

“Huh? So ... wait, you’re saying that news is a business?” Maria asked, eyes widening.

“Hmm...” For the first time, Clay seemed puzzled. Leaning back, he gave her a calculated look. “Have you ever watched the news?”

“No ... why would I? I ain’t got time for that shit ... I’m too busy takin’ care of my people...”

Maria trailed off, thinking hard on the revelation. “Aye, yo, so ... if they’re all about clicks and all, then ... they need somethin’ to catch people’s attention, right?”

“Naturally.”

“So, hmm ... if I was coverin’ a local drug lord, and I wanted everyone to get in on it, then ... I’d be tryin’ to get all his dirt.”

“Eh ... I guess,” Clay mumbled, trying to work through her comparison. “Look ... I expect these news agencies to spin you into a story that will get the most traffic ... what’s always playing on the news?”

“I told you, I don’t watch that shit!” Maria grumbled, glaring out of the window.

“Right ... if you were to combine everything the media plays, then it’s almost all negative. Turn on any channel—make a game out of it, and try to find something positive. If you compare both sides ... it’s always something bad because that’s what brings in the money.”

Maria shrugged. “Aye, makes sense.”

“Right, and so, what will they do? More than not, the person interviewing you has already selected very carefully crafted questions to get specific details about you that will generate them the most money. Meaning, they’ll attempt to put you into a sequence of corners by accusing you of various forms of misbehavior.”

A dark frown moved Maria’s lips. “Woah, woah, hombre, what the hell does that mean ... they’ll try to make me look like a fool and judge me?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes. It’s a reporter’s job to select the things they might ask about you in some manner that doesn’t indicate a substantive bias ... however, what is expected and the results don’t often match up. And as I stated previously, almost anything they ask will be negative...”

He paused before regaining his poised demeanor. “You’ve been in the military’s care. Have you not?”

“Okay, okay,” Maria shifted uncomfortably, “I’m not liking how this whole shit sounds now. Damn, so, uh ... you’re actin’ like an interviewer to prep me?”

He nodded, and she folded her arms under her chest, trying to think through her response to not look like a fool, but he spoke before she’d gathered her thoughts.

“They’ll comment on how you sit, the words you use, and the attitude you present. Right now, you’re not giving the cameras a good look.”

“Aye, give me a moment, shit ... eh ... okay, so smile, right?” She said, forcing her lips into place. “I, uh ... how do you know that?”

“Asking a question? Please, Ms. Espinar, this is an interview, and the U.S. Army reached out to our station to obtain this meeting. Didn’t they let you know?”

“Oh ... shit. Okay, yeah, I...”

“Please refrain from cursing on-air, Ms. Espinar. Now, could you answer the original question? You were in the military’s care, weren’t you?”

“Yeah...” Maria grunted.

“Mmh ... what have you been doing for the military?”

“Uh, healing, mostly ... I mean, there’s a lot of people that got hurt from that Vampire attack, right?”

“Yeah ... the Seattle Massacre. Can you tell me why you think Mythickin should be allowed to roam free after such an incident?”

Maria’s arms tightened around her abdomen. “Wait ... what are you sayin’—I should be locked up? That’s stupid, I didn’t do that sh—stuff.”

“We’ve gotten reports that you took part in what some stations are calling the Miami Massacre ... how is that not related?”

Maria stiffened. “Eh ... huh? No, no, I didn’t kill anyone...”

Clay leaned forward with narrowed eyes. “Perhaps not, but you were involved with Mythickin that did, and did nothing to stop it. How can you justify that, and do you think Mythickin are dangerous after so many tens of thousands have been killed by them?”

“Tens of ... what the hell kind of question is that?” Maria growled. “Yo, they don’t know about that Miami shit, right?”

A long puff of air shot through Clay's lips. "I told the General you weren't ready for interviews after reviewing your file."

"Aye, I'm just sayin' ... what's up with those questions, huh? It's like you wanna set it off, throwin' around shit like that!" She fumed.

"You can't lie. Correct?"

"Yeah, but I don't have to respond!"

"No ... you'll just sit there with a dumb look on your face ... granted, it's beautiful, but that won't save you from the criticism, and the image the General wants to instill with the public will be thrown in the gutter. Do you realize that you're supposed to be the model image of Mythickin for the entire United States?"

It was as if cold water had been dumped on her head. "Huh ... woah, what?"

"Yes ... you are supposed to be the healing hand that mends the hearts of everyone affected and terrified of Mythickin. You don't think that these reporters and anchors have bias and their own career objectives in mind? They're waiting to crucify you."

Maria couldn't respond, mind pulling in as she thought on the Master Sargent's words.

Clearing her throat, Maria took a deep breath. "Alright ... shit, I get it. How do I not fall on my face?" An itch formed at her temple, and she scratched it with prejudice. "How do I respond to somethin' like that ... 'cause I wanted to punch your face in ... tellin' me I should be put in a cage ... screw that..."

A smile lit the man's face. "We can start with that ... you can get angry, in fact, it'll be good to show that, but ... it needs to be controlled. For instance, call them out on their BS, and ask why they aren't talking about all the lives you save. Pull up a few examples to direct the conversation into a positive light rather than dwelling on all the negative stuff happening around the world."

Swallowing a hard lump in her throat, Maria's thighs tightened against each other as she imagined what these circling sharks might ask if Clay was just warming her up. "What if they ... ya know, keep pushin'?"

Clay hummed softly. "It depends on how far they push, but one direction I could see the journalist heading is a negative to positive narrative swap..."

"Well, we're not going to have a debate on journalism, but if a journalist doesn't ask the tough questions, then how can you give good answers?"

"What would you say in response?"

Maria bit her lip. "Uh ... it just sounds like you're accusing me of all this bad stuff, ya know? I don't like it, kay?"

"Mmh, I'd respond ... it depends on what the tough questions are. For context, how did you come by this question?"

Maria sank in her chair with a low groan.

The rest of the flight to Seattle was filled with her getting schooled by the Master Sargent while trying to prepare her for the event, and she breathed a sigh of relief when they finally stepped off of the jet.

A limo met them, and two men with matching suits promptly stood outside of it; to Maria, they looked like private security.

The temperature was notably warmer than Montana, but still far too cold for the shivering Unicorn. Maria rubbed her jacket sleeves as she followed Clay to the vehicle; she didn't want to do the interviews anymore, but it was a part of the deal, and the pressure hit her chest as the conversation went on.

The warmth of the rising sun helped calm her nerves, but that only lasted a moment between the plane and limousine.

Two more men were waiting inside the vehicle; the Sargent Master and one of the guards joined them.

One man was in his late fifties while the other was in his sixties, and both had their eyes firmly fixed on her.

The elder gentlemen reached out his hand as Maria managed her hair while settling in. “My name is Paul Reed, and my associate is Dr. Wilson Jasper.”

Maria hesitantly took his outstretched hand as the car began moving without direction.

“Hey ... uh, you must be some of those dudes General Dallas talked about,” she commented, remembering the general’s name after Clay had mentioned it so many times on the way over.

Both men smiled at her response.

“That we are,” Reed chuckled. “I must say ... the vision before me is not what I expected.”

Maria forced a laugh. “What, a big horse?”

“Mmh, not a woman with such an exquisite appearance ... that’s for sure. However, your manner of speaking is ... nevermind, that’s not why I’m here. No, let me get to the point ... business.”

His eyes sharpened, and Maria glanced at Clay, but he was seemingly not even listening to the conversation as he passively looked out of the window.

“Uh-huh ... what did you have in mind?”

“I’ll be honest with you, Ms. Espinar ... the appearance of all these magical healers has caused ... let’s just call it an upset within the medical community.”

Understanding that she was getting over her head with how pointed Clay had been on the plane ride over, Maria nodded. “That bad?” She sighed, playing with a lock of her hair. “Look, all I wanted to do was make a lil’ money to get things movin’ for my people. It’s rough on the streets, ya know?”

“I don’t, to be frank,” Reed frowned, “and I wouldn’t pretend to.”

Maria was a little shocked by his honesty, and she could feel the seriousness in his voice. “Right now, we are heading to a hospital ... a very expensive private hospital, caring for my grandson, which is why I’m here with you right now. I’ve already tried other magical healers over the past two days, and ... I’m willing to put my full support behind the person that can support him.”

The force pressing against Maria’s chest increased; this wasn’t a game to this man, and she could feel the intensity in his tone.

“I can see that you’re starting to get nervous, and that’s completely understandable, but I don’t think you grasp the war you’re stepping in front of.”

“Add it to the list,” Maria muttered, hands tightly pressed against her stomach.

Dr. Jasper cleared his throat. “Please, Mr. Reed, let’s give the girl the chance to breathe. I’m sure this entire week has been nothing but stress for her.”

Maria released a pent up lake of air, giving the doctor a forced smile. “Damn ... for real, though. Takin’ pictures for some company is a lot less stressful than all this interview shit comin’ up ... like damn. I just thought I’d heal a few people and be done with all this business.”

The cabinet became silent as both Reed and Jasper thought silently on her statement.

“Ms. Espinar,” Reed gave her a calculated stare.

“Sup?” She mumbled, shifting in her seat a little to stare at him; she felt less intimidated by guns pointed in her face than how this trip was turning out.

“Do you understand that you’ve basically just made yourself the face of politicians taking on Big Pharma and the entire medical industry? You are representing a new field that is threatening an extremely powerful, global monopoly that only had small-time herbal remedies from local shops to contend with.

“Word is already beginning to spread to these company shareholders and patent owners of this alarming new wave that will cripple their livelihood. Doctors will be put out of a job, yet still, they’ll be forced to pay for the extravagant debts they expected to return with interest ... they went into the field believing they’d make enough to pay that back.

“For instance, in Venezuela, an example of what happens when an industry or economy goes through rapid upheaval—you’re looking at a doctor making barely enough to put food in front of him and his family, and that was without competition within the...”

Clay spoke up, interpreting it in a way she could understand. “In other words ... what would you do if someone threatened your neighborhood or your means to take care of your little brother?”

Maria’s fists tightened against her thighs. “... You’re sayin’ ... even my family could be in danger?”

Reed sighed, brushing back his gray hair. “Political, social ... they’ll do anything to try to discredit this looming threat, and there will be a lot of people affected by just this one change. We’re entering a very turbulent time within society, and this field is one of those big areas of conflict ... the medical industry is involved in just about every aspect of peoples’ lives. You’ll be attacked from every angle.”

Maria’s voice became hoarse. “Okay ... how do I win, then? Damn ... make it sound like I’m takin’ on the whole world.” Maria growled, feeling the weight on her shoulders increase yet again.

“A big chunk of it,” Dr. Jasper whispered. “Not only are you moving into the medical scene, but with the government’s aid, you’ll become a prime target of anarchists, terrorists, demophobia, and having every move you make criticized.”

“In essence,” Clay gave her a weak smile, “you’ll be a shining star in the darkness.”

Maria didn’t respond as they moved through the much lighter traffic than expected, but she had to remind herself that Martial Law was still in effect.

Jasper and Reed gave each other a look, but their attention turned to Clay as he released a soft hum. “Rethinking it? It’s okay if you’re scared.”

Maria’s nose twisted, gut tightening before a smile lifted her lips, and she chuckled. “Aye, I ain’t a pop-bitch ... naw, that ain’t me! Am I nervous? Bet your asses! Shit ... still, I ain’t ever backed down from a fight, and I ain’t startin’ now.”

“What are you saying?” Dr. Jasper carefully asked. “You’re ready for all that heat?”

She laughed, mind clearing as all the fear Clay, Reed, and Jasper laid on her slide off. “I ain’t ever been that chica to back down ... no, I don’t play games when snakes bite.”

Her silver irises moved to Reed, vision cold. “I don’t think I can be that perfect lil’ Unicorn you was tryin’ to make me into.”

Reed’s frown turned into a smile at her answer. “Can a Unicorn really step onto this dirty battlefield?”

Her jaw locked into a smile as she closed her fingers into a fist. “I’m making it, and if haters be waitin’ for me to take an L, then I’m takin’ offense. We’re livin’ in hell cause the

devils will test you, eh? I ain't ever goin' back to my old life ... if it's war, it's war. Yeah, I can play dirty."

Clay leaned forward with a firm smile. "Maybe General Dallas didn't choose the wrong face for the Demi community. Your confidence doesn't come from those around you but from within, and you'll need that heart with what's coming."

Maria smirked. "So, low-key ... all that shit was just to see if you could shake me?"

"And to let you know what was coming," Clay replied, leaning back while folding his fingers across his lap.

"Heh, asshole," Maria grinned. "Ya know, you're growin' on me, amigo!"

Reed took out a bottle of ritzy alcohol with a bright smile. "Drink?"

Maria's cheer instantly dropped to the gutter. "Gah ... I wish, homie, but I purify the stuff just by holdin' it."

"Oof," Clay reached over to take a glass as they gave her a pitying look.

"Yes, my condolences," Dr. Jasper said with a forced laugh. "So ... now, the real negotiations can start. Eh, Mr. Reed?"

Reed sipped at the dark liquid before clearing his throat. "Ah ... that's good. A drink after a tense discussion is always the best ... yes, Dr. Jasper, now we can begin."

Maria straightened, waiting for him to continue.

He looked at his glass, swirling it around while his lips fell into a brooding frown. "You can cure congenital heart defects. Correct?"

The moment he asked, Maria's brow furrowed with the response from the system. "Not right now, but ... I'm pretty sure I can if I continue healing. If all these injured people are waiting for me ... I got the juice."

Reed's appraising eyes lifted to her. "That's good to hear ... the other healers I talked to could mend wounds and even recover hair loss to some degree, but Tom assured me if anyone had the ability, you did."

Maria was a little impressed by how powerful the man's cadence had become as the conversation continued, and she took an envelope that he pulled from his suit's breast pocket.

"If you do that for my grandson, then this will only be the start of our relationship. It runs in our DNA ... if you can cure this curse that has followed my family ... I can't tell you how thankful I will be, and so ... let my actions show you."

Maria smiled, opening the letter, and her grin grew as her heart palpitated. Hands falling, she folded the paper, vision settling on the man. "Let's get started; how close are we to that hospital?"

Thirty million ... and this is only the start?

"Eight minutes," Dr. Jasper stated, finding landmarks outside of the window.

Reed downed the rest of his glass with a wry grin. "It's the dawn of a new age."