Chapter 71

Healing doesn't happen in a straight line.

That was something my therapist used to say to me. Well, back when I would still dutifully attend my FBI mandated sessions. It was either that or staying away from work. So, an easy, but unpleasant choice. I used to sit in that stale office, pretending to listen and to be engaged, most of the words spoken meaningless and shallow, wastes of time. It's rather ironic that now is the first time I actually recall anything my therapist tried to talk me through. What better time than now for those annoying words to find their way back from my subconsciousness to my consciousness only to wring my heart.

Healing doesn't happen in a straight line. Ugh There used to be a part of me, deep, deep down which used to curl up in something resembling anger or perhaps resentment when it heard that line. I never quite understood why. After all, what else was that sentence if but an overly cheesy cliché, without any real significance or consequence? Why would I react to it in any other way than by rolling my eyes at it?

Healing doesn't happen in a straight line.

Fuck you, sincerely.

Now, many months after hearing that sentence for the first time, that little part of me, that deeply tucked away part of me, that angry, that resentful, that scared part of me seems to have just expanded and expanded until it has fully become me. I don't know a huge amount of stuff for certain, but right at this moment, right now, I feel like I can pretty well state that I know that healing doesn't happen in a straight line, never mind in a fucking line in the first place. Healing is just an overused word to signify time passing, and our emotions growing stale around our wounds until they form a hard scab over the wound, and then, our emotions can rarely poke us and hurt us anymore. Healing doesn't happen. You can't heal from something unless time passes, and when the thing that keeps hurting you, and the thing you keep hurting live so intrinsically connected lives, no one heals, no one scabs over.

That is what goes on inside of my head as I numbly am forced to drag Wanda's limp body through the corridor I barged through eons ago, naively thinking I could change anything, that I could save her. I wonder what my therapist would have to say about this if he could see me right now. Here I am, Olivia, me, hello, having just pressed a little button and potentially made someone completely lose their sense of identity. Not just someone, but someone I love. And someone who said they loved me, trusted me. What am I supposed to do now, Mr. Therapist? Re-evaluate, meditate and refocus?

Sincerely, fuck you.

After I pressed the button, I seem to not be able to really recall what happened at the same time as I can recall everything in such painful detail I suspect it might be etched to the writing of my very cells to never be forgotten. I'm blurry on the details. And yet not. My fingers still feel like they hold that cool box in between them, the feeling of the sleek, satin-like black button is imprinted on my skin. I won't ever be able to wash away the feeling. The feeling of the electricity burning through the wires, burning away. Away from me. Away from me and towards her. From me. To her.

My body has decided to at once forget and to never forget at the same time. As though to make sure that I am entirely clear on whose fault Wanda's pain ultimately is, Strucker simply told me to undo Wanda's restraints, remove her cuffs but leave the one around her neck, and to take her back to our cell. I physically bear the result of what I just did in my arms. There is no denying, no re-evaluating, meditating, or refocusing on the result of myactions.

Wanda was always surprisingly light and tiny. I can easily remember several moments when I would be surprised by her smallness when she somehow seems to loom so large in my mind and in my life. Yet here I am, carrying the person who weighs so heavily on my mind with little difficulty. The stress of her last few years has worn her thin, and I've just gone and broken what was already cracked. I forget it is Wanda I am carrying. I'm not carrying just Wanda. I am carrying an entire lifetime of guilt in my arms.

She's hard to hold. Her head keeps rolling left to right and her limp limbs do nothing to help her stay in my arms but I would never, ever drop her. I've done enough. I refuse to look down at her face as I struggle through the hallway surrounded by mindless guards. I feel dirty, as though I shouldn't even be allowed to touch her body after what I did to it. After the way I made it tense up as it struggled against the current, and as it ultimately met defeat and went limp. I don't deserve to have been the one to have made that fear materialize in her eyes, to have been the last one she saw before she passed out. And now I dare to pretend as though I am helping. A healing gesture. A lovinggesture.

Sincerely, fuck me.

I've emptily put one heavy foot in front of the other, not aware of my surroundings. I just follow where I'm meant to go, no questions asked. There are no more questions, anyway. It's all been decided, now. Apparently, we've made it back to our original holding cell. Comfortable, safe, and uninviting. The door is opened for me and I adjust myself slightly, slipping through the door awkwardly, making sure Wanda stays safe, which feels like the biggest fucking joke on the planet. She was never safe with me, and I should have been strong enough to realize it the instant I was sat down on that chair. But thank you, therapist, I now know my own weakness. From the moment the woman in my arms laid her burning red eyes upon me, my weakness would become her. Funny how I am trained to read people, to figure out what secrets they harbor, yet I couldn't figure out my own before it was too late.

The door slams shut behind me. The sound echoes, complaining and berating me, mocking me, forming a chorus from around the room, from all corners. I force my tired body to move once more because no matter how much my muscles complain, I won't listen. Not until she's safe. Not until I have undone my damage. Only then, will I stop for good.

I slowly progress all the way to the wall furthest away from the door, where I finally allow myself to let her cold body slowly lower towards the floor. She sinks down without protest. She's almost like a porcelain doll. I carefully keep one hand under her head as I lay it down on the floor. Then, I remove the light cardigan I have been wearing. I debate between placing it under her head or over her body. She looks so pale under the fluorescent lights, though. And her normally warm skin feels unusually tepid under my guilty touch. I place the cardigan over her as though she is made out of the most breakable material in the world.

I let myself come to sit next to her, scooting closer until I am able to lean against the wall whilst placing her head up in my lap, hoping that it would make her feel slightly more comfortable than being on the cold concrete floor. I tell myself her comfort is the only reason why I am doing this. I can't allow myself to crave her proximity anymore. I need to let her go. Once I make it all up to her. She and I were never made to exist together. We're from worlds apart, her and me. This was all just a sick joke someone up there came up with. I look up at the ceiling.

I hope you've had your laugh.

I absentmindedly let my fingers toy with her hair while I watch the golden strands slip between my fingers. I can count at least seven different shimmers in her hair as it catches the light and reflects it back to me. If I allow myself, I can almost pretend like I am holding live fire in my hands. She was always fire personified.

My fingernails occasionally scrape against her scalp, but I keep my tough feather-light, wanting nothing more than to undo the terrible claws that just scorched through her because of me. I wonder what'll happen once she comes to. I softly trace one of her eyebrows with my index finger. Then the other. They're still. I almost wish they would pull together in that way they would when Wanda would be thinking about something, her eyes glazed over, physically here yet mentally lost in her own little world. I trace the slope of her small nose. Down to her lips, completely relaxed, an unusual sight. Usually, they would be pulled in either a small smirk, or an annoyed scowl.

I then let my hand come to rest on her sternum, over her heart. I need to be certain she's still here, in some way. Her ribcage slowly, very slowly expands and contracts in a steadfast pattern. Watching her like this, I can almost pretend she's just asleep. My breathing unconsciously syncs up with hers and I let my head lean back against the hard wall behind me. Underneath my palm, faintly, I feel her heart. And then I wait. I wait for her to come back to me. I pray she'll come back to me.

I must've dozed off at some point. The lights in the cell do not change, ever, apparently, yet I can tell time has passed the next time I open my dry eyes as my entire body feels stiff from having sat in the same position for too long, and the cold, hard floor and wall underneath me dig into my bones. My body begs for me to move, to switch position just an inch or two, but I can't. Wanda's head is still lying heavily on me, and I can't disturb her. Whatever time her body needs to take after what she just went through, is what it'll get. I'll see to it. My head throbs painfully, and that makes me feel ashamed. I deign to feel annoyed at a headache? The head in my lap should be the one to feel annoyed. Not me. I'm probably just suffering from a spout of dehydration... which reminds me! My eyes land on Wanda's untouched glass of water on her tray just out of reach from me. She should drink some water; she for one must be absolutely and completely dehydrated. I try to remember when I last saw her eat or drink anything. Maybe at Stark's party? I was slightly distracted then.

I carefully lift Wanda's head, scoot out of the way and then place it gently down on the floor. I feel guilty for allowing her head to tough the dirty cell floor, but she doesn't seem to mind. She doesn't wake. Or react whatsoever, actually. I crawl towards the glass, then I crawl back to my original position, glas in hand, and return Wanda's head onto my lap. It feels so heavy. I've never felt her fully give herself over to me. There was always something pulling her back. In this weird little way, I almost feel like she has. It's complete trust. I ignore the fact that she has no choice in this moment. I again wish I could know what goes on underneath those locks as I brush a stray hair out of her face. She looks so pale and innocent. I won't let any harm come to her again. I protectively look up from her soft features, as if I am expecting the next threat to stand right next to me. Of course, there's nothing there. It's just Wanda and me.

I look back down. Wanda's still not moved a muscle. I'm trying to push away the feeling, but worry is starting to grow in me. Surely, she should start to wake up soon? I watch her face as though she's going to open those eyes of her and tell me to stop staring. I push away another, more selfish feeling I cannot afford to have. I lift Wanda's head up slightly, tilting it and bringing the glass to her lips. I tilt the glass slightly, and water meets her mouth. I'm not doing a stellar job with it. Most of the water runs down the side of her face, but I'm pretty sure some of it must've gotten into her. At least I hope so.

My heart almost jumps out of my chest when Wanda's eyebrows twitch slightly and she scowls ever so slightly, her face still entirely perfect even when she looks displeased. I quickly place the glass down next to me and use my sleeve to gently wipe the sides of her mouth and cheeks where the water dripped down. My action makes her scowl deepen and her eyelids twitch slightly.

"Hey, Wanda?" I whisper in a low voice, which sounds like it belongs to someone else.

Wanda doesn't reply in so many words. Her eyebrows furrow further, creating fine lines on her forehead as an almost imperceptible groan escapes her. She's coming to.

"Take your time." I say, not completely sure she's aware of my presence.

Wanda groans slightly louder, her face scrunching up. She lifts a shaking hand, bringing it to her forehead. She covers her eyes and her body shuffles a little, my carefully placed cardigan slipping off her slightly.

"Hey, hun. You okay?" I place a hand on top of Wanda's on her forehead.

Wanda goes still.

"Do you need anything? I've not got much to offer-" I awkwardly say, brushing some of her tousled hair behind her ear.

Wanda still doesn't reply, but she lowers her shaking hand slightly down, and then her eyes flutter open, her familiar green eyes - looking unfamiliar. It takes her a second, then her eyes shoot left to right before they finally meet mine. I can see fear building in her.

"Hey, hey, you're okay." I try to sound as soothing as I can, feeling as on edge as Wanda looks.

Her lips part slightly as her breathing intensifies. Her hand still shakes where it's hovering by her throat.

Her lips move and a croaking sound comes out of her.

"Take it easy, Wands." I smile a taunt smile and her eyes widen.

"Wh-" She wheezes.

I frown, trying to understand her. Her voice is broken and unreliable from her screaming earlier. She wheezes again, scooting herself slightly further down my legs, away from me.

"Wh- who-" She coughs. "What-"

It feels like instead of warm blood, my veins are filled with ice. My hands feel cold. Surely they didn't... they wouldn't... Not they, you.

As if on cue, Wanda tries again.

"You." Her voice cracks just like my heart.

"No, it wasn't, Wanda, I-" I try but before I can react or do anything whatsoever, some of Wanda's scarlet crackles around her fingertips.
"Wanda, please, calm down. You need to rest."
Wanda pushes herself up to sit, her eyes still staring at me with a look in them I don't like at all. Fear

"Wanda-" My voice trails off.

"You." Wanda speaks again, her voice low. Cold.

"Livvy, remember?" I try but she doesn't seem to recollect at all. She frowns, her head tilting slightly to the side.

"Wanda, come on." I reach out to her.

Wrong move.

Wanda gasps slightly, looking like a panicked deer. She quickly lifts her shaking hand, placing it between us. Scarlet crackles happily around her fingers, twirling around them, waiting to break free.

"I'm sorry." I freeze in place, my heart beating rapidly in my chest.

"Did you...?" Wanda squeezes her eyes shut, shaking her head, confused. "I can't... I'm confused."
"It's okay, it's normal. You're safe now. It's over." I quickly speak, syllables rolling over each other in their haste to get out.

Wanda opens her eyes, which are filled with hurt and confusion. It breaks my heart to see her like that. I wish I could do something to help, but I have no idea what she needs from me.

"Tell me what I can do." I whisper, my voice shaking, sounding paper-thin.

Wanda frowns again, her eyes darting around the cell again before they land on me and she tilts her head again. Her eyes flash red. Then, I feel warm all over and I know she's in my head. I stare at her as I hope she's not-

"Livvy?" Wanda asks again, sounding slightly scared.

And I press the button.

I feel burning needles prick all around me and I'm yanked upwards. Air leaves my lungs as I am pressed against the cell wall, scarlet magic lapping all around me. Wanda rises in front of me, her eyes hard and cold. She doesn't look like herself. Like my Wanda. She looks like the woman I met for the first time dressed in my military gear, straight after I broke into her home. Her eyes stare at me without any of our history present. There's no recognition. Only coldness.

"Wanda -please - I-" I gasp, my lungs slowly becoming emptier and emptier underneath the pressure of her magic.

"Shut up." Wanda's cracked, hoarse voice reaches me and she lifts her now truly shaking hand slightly higher, her fingers twitching and her magic dutifully responds and the pressure increases all around me. Tears escape my eyes.

"Why can't I-?" Wanda croaks, breaking eye contact with me, and looks down at her fingers.

"Please let me-" I struggle, but she doesn't listen to me at all.

She stares at her hand, frowning, concentrating. Then she wobbles slightly, and the magic slightly lessens its grasp on me and I gulp in air like a newborn baby. Wanda looks up at me, still frowning, looking utterly confused. And very pale. Too pale. If she doesn't stop soon, she might pass out before I do.

She takes a determined step towards me, twisting her hand and the magic intensifies again and I whimper, the hot needles pushing in on me again. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to get any air to enter my lungs but nothing comes to me. Her magic pushes on me and I just wait for a rib to crack under the pressure. I feel light-headed. Pressure squeezes in from everywhere. I wish she'd just get it over with.

Then, all of a sudden and without any warning, the pressure dissipates and I open my eyes just in time as my legs buckle underneath me without Wanda's magic to uphold me. Wanda staggers again in front of me and then she drops on the floor, joining me, barely able to place her hands out in front of her to halt her fall.

"What did you do?" She gasps, looking at me with teary eyes.

"I didn't - I'm so sorry, Wanda." I gasp back at her, tears falling from my eyes.

"What did -where am I?" Wanda's voice shakes and she looks at me in such a pitiful way all I want to do is give her a hug, but I know better than to approach her.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?" Wanda coldly asks, and I realize that by pressing that button, I've undone any healing we've done together, reducing us to less than strangers.

Healing does indeed not happen in a straight line.

A/N: Oof, alright, that's fun eh? We're entering the final quarter of this story and I've got a few loose threads I want to get to still, but I thought I'd test the waters here a little bit. Soooo, what would you prefer for Liv and Wands? To have a happy ending, or, a sad one? I've got ideas for either, but let me know what your heart tells you!

As always I am so excited and grateful for your reads and your time, your votes, and especially your comments!

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