### Novi Grad, Sokovia 2013

Something about this place felt worse than the last. There was something dark in the air, menacing, creeping in the shadows. I thought I was done with experiments, so to be back holed up in a cell was a little more than disheartening. The looming feeling of anxiety had begun to resurface, forcing my mind into a downward spiral of conjuring up maybe the worst visions I could have ever had.

I preferred the heinous missions over being a lab rat—over never knowing what kind of pain you'd be submerged in next. It's like standing in a pitch black room, your muscles tensed up and waiting for a blow that you're not sure is even going to come, and if it does, no matter how ready you think you are, it always hurts a thousand times more than you could have ever imagined. At least on missions, I wasn't the one at the mercy of another's hands. It was a vile thing to even think about, but honesty to myself was all I had le.

They didn't tell me much before sending me here, but i've picked up enough to hear about a shiny new experiment regarding some sort of matter they've gotten their hands on. A sceptre, I heard one man say in passing. His smile dripping of merciless wonder, and his mind was probably just as revolting too. It wasn't like the others where the doctors would pretend to be nice, put on some slimy smirk and call me a good girl when I make it out of their poking and prodding barely breathing.

# This was di erent, this was darker.

When I got there, the testing had already begun. It was seemingly in the early stages, before they got anything right because those I'd see being dragged away, they don't come back. Not even in wheelchairs or gurneys, they just disappear. What i've noticed is that they save the candidates with the most potential for last, the ones who were more likely to withstand whatever heinous program they've created and the weaker volunteers— they'd be dispensable.

Every time I see another being dragged to their doom, I wonder if they know they wouldn't be returning. I always wonder about what sickly lie they've been told, if they were made to believe their sacrifice was for some greater good or some bullshit to mask the real intentions. There was no greater good, this place, and all the others were anything but. I didn't know which nightmare would tear worse, to watch as unknowing victims are dragged to their death or to realize that they knew, that life was just worth an experiment, a last ditch e ort to mean something- anything.

It was my first night there and as usual, I did what I could to try and dri o. I never liked the sinking feeling those cells brought, no matted how di erent they looked— they all felt the same anyway. So I shut my eyes as tightly as I could, did everything from counting sheep to slowing my breathing and yet I couldn't seem to shake the vile fragments that seemed to float in the air. It didn't help that I could hear everything that transpired outside of my walls.

Every thundering footstep, every mu led conversation, every buzzer and slamming door and... humming. It stood out against the mundane sounds of my surroundings. It was a steady tune, almost cheerful tune that masked a thick emptiness beneath. It was faint, barely a ripple in the air as it bled through the ventilation right at the foot of my hard bed and it didn't stop for hours. Just the same tune, until the early hours of the night until whoever was singing had dri ed o.

#### Admittedly, I did too.

I thought i'd have found it unbearable, that repetitive sound seeping from the walls. I don't really understand why I didn't hate it, why it didn't make me want to rip my hair out despite the relentlessness. The next couple of nights would be the same, that tune ringing ghostly in the wind as I'd close my eyes and focus on the sound. As weak as it was, it drowned out enough for me to actually sink into slumber despite my burning curiosity of who was on the other end of that vent.

They'd let me out some days, but never enough to step outside of the facility. I'd be able to roam the halls, participate in their little tests and in return was a fraction of what they defined as freedom. Though, how free could I actually be in a place like that? Sometimes i'd pass the volunteers as they're being whisked away, their eyes just as hollow as the look on their faces. A part of me wanted to ask, if they knew what this meant, if they knew what they'd be giving up but how could I ever have the right when I was doing it too. So I settle into silence, watching their feet drag and mu led screams crawl upon the walls and pretend like there was nothing I could have done, because it was just easier that way.

#### Until it wasn't.

Until on one of my meaningless paces down the same hallway, I hear the same tune. It hits my ears with crisp clarity, stopping me in my tracks. It wasn't mu led by the walls or ghosting the air, it was right there. She was right there. A girl, who looked around my age was being escorted down the other end of the hall, slowly approaching me. The men beside her were large, almost twice her size and their footsteps shook the core of the ground we stood upon and yet, I can hear her distinctly. Just humming under her breath, the same steady tune that filled my slumber for the better part of a week.

When she gets closer, our eyes meet ever so briefly. I didn't realize I was holding my breath until she's steps away, her back then turned to me until she disappears down the turn at the end of the corridor, leaving me with nothing but the faint memory of her cool green eyes and autumn hair. She wore the same jumpsuit as everybody else, all of the volunteers that were whisked away, dissolving into oblivion. It only meant one thing.

## She wasn't coming back.

It all happens so fast, all sense and logic thrown out the window as I find myself in a hurried bolt, running down the direction she was taken as all skeptical eyes turn to me. I could hear some of the agents screaming for me to stop in their thick accents, trying to stick to me like the vile fragments of what I was racing against. I definitely had no plan, but my heart was in my throat and my body felt stone cold as I scoured every passing room for the girl who sang the tune.

Then I see her, through the window of a testing room. She was sitting on the ground and plastered before her were an array of items I didn't care to find the purpose in before I burst through the door, all eyes, including hers, snapping to me at my hasty entrance. Strucker was there, sitting front row with his cold, emotionless eyes. That man was the epitome of evil, but I wasn't there for him. I was there for her.

She looks empty, barely even surprised at my presence. Her eyes only gloss over me like she was trying to understand myintentions, trying to pick me apart from where I stood. Then her hands- a bright red energy wisps from her fingertips that cement me in place, heaving and panicked as every item before her begins to levitate. All of the other doctors looked like they were doused in awe, but not Strucker. Strucker only kept his eyes on me, like he was waiting. Just waiting.

"You're going to kill her." Breathlessly, it falls from my lips and sends the room into a deafening silence. The only sound that ever became, was the sound of the once levitated objects crashing to the ground. She looked confused, maybe even afraid as Strucker lightly tilts his

head, mouth parting to speak as all eyes shi to glue to me once more. My bones ached under their scrutinizing gaze, trembling and thundering as they start to laugh. They actually laugh, everyone but the girl and Strucker were nearly doubled over in amusement as I look on in horror.

"Kill her?" Strucker reiterates, a ghost of a smile on his lips as he rises in his seat.

The guards arrive not a second a er, each one of them instantly going for me. One connects a hand to my jaw, sending me stumbling back and before I could get a swing in, another grabs me to hold me up against the wall. My staggered breaths and mu led curses taint the still air and through all the ruckus, I find her eyes—looking back at me with a distant ghost of worry hiding behind the hollow darkness.

"We would never kill her, she's the best one." Strucker steps close enough for his whisper to hit my ears, all eight agents holding down every inch of me as I tried with all my might to get my hands on him.

And I almost do, eight men could have never been enough to best my hatred. But then more came, and before I knew It I was being dragged away and thrown back into my cell with nothing but the silence and anger to blanket me within the constraints of that cement box.

That girl looked painfully empty, floating through time as they get their slimy little hands on her and I couldn't stand the mere thought of it. I wanted to kick and scream and fight, but there was no use. Not there. The hours go by agonizingly slow, the sun had set and the dark night sky had taken over and still- no humming. They've killed her, I was almost sure of it.

"Hello?" It was so so , barely even a whisper but it jolts me out of bed in an instant.

It came from the vent.

"Hello?" I call back with hesitance, knelt down by the grated opening like a desperate idiot as I waited for something— anything. When silence was all that greeted me, I made a move to head back to

the bed. I wasn't even entirely sure it was the same person- for all I knew they've filled the spot in and it's just another naïve civilian trying to make their life mean more than it did.

"Was it you?" I stop dead in my tracks, turning back to the vent as I approach it once more.

"What?"

"The one who said they'd kill me. Was it you?" She asked, all at once confirming my underlying suspicions as I take a spot right by the vent, my back pressed to the wall.

"Yeah. I guess I was wrong." I breathe, head hanging back to rest against the hard surface.

"Why did you say that?" She asks in the faintest tone, sounding just as hollow as she looked in that room. I let the silence take over for a few moments, bringing my knees up to my chest as I part my mouth to speak;

"Don't you see the others? They never come back."

"Why did you go a er me?"

Admittedly, I was asking myself that too.

"I could hear you singing that— song. I hear it every night." I disclose with a so sigh, my heart thrashing in place as I waited for a reply that took a torturously long amount of time to come.

"You tried to save me... because I sang?" She sounded heavily

conflicted, confusion bleeding from her tone as it sinks in that when she put it that way— it did sound stupid.

"I— like the song." I give up, because there was no way to really explain why I barged in and caused a scene without sounding like even more of an idiot.

"It's from a show." She replies a er a while, her voice sounding a little more prominent this time around.

"What show?"

"It's an... old sitcom. I like it."

"What's it called?"

Silence.

"Dick Van Dyke." She replies flatly, barely a ghost of emotion behind her words but somehow, in the strangest reason- it makes me smile. "What's it about?"

It takes her a while to tell me, to even speak more than a handful of words but she does, eventually. She sounded a lot like a shy child, hiding behind a wall of shadows and issues I could never begin to imagine but I had all night and nowhere to go so I made it my personal mission to coax as much as I could out of her.

It definitely wasn't easy, but I found that if we were talking about her shows— she sounded most free. There were fleeting moments, ones that disappear as soon as they arrive of her voice sounding somewhat lively. I could picture a small smile on her lips sometimes, and I'm wondering if she could do the same with me.

So that's how I spend my nights, my back up against the wall and talking to a grated vent until the sun begins to rise and pure exhaustion— or another ghastly test rips me away from my spot. We'd spend hours talking about the most mundane things, never really gracing anything substantial but we were both satisfied for the shallowness, because for once, things didn't feel too heavy.

There was one particular night, though, where she sounded a lot weaker than usual. She had been gone all day, whisked away to godknows-where only to return when the moon was hung high and the stars were glimmering. Sometimes i'd wait by the little window of my cell, because the guards would take that route and she'd be right there— a mess of mystery and autumn hair. I never even got her name, really.

"Are you alright?" I couldn't shove the question down any longer a er nearly an hour of one word answers and sharp little gasps.

"I'm just tired." She faintly breathes.

"They've done a number on you, haven't they?" I ask, and as expected it takes her a good while to muster up enough strength to reply. I'd gotten used to the fragmented moments of silence, because even then I could still feel her there—just a few steps away only with a million things in between.

"It's okay. It's what I wanted." The despondence in her tone was nearly heart wrenching, sparking an array of pained curiosity. "What you wanted?" I reiterate, unable to fully comprehend what she meant.

"This is for the best. They're helping me— they said we could end the war." There's a glimmer of childlike hope that shines through, like she was treading past the thickest mud with a false promise of a better day and I couldn't stop the way my heart sank to its depths.

If she only knew.

"They're hurting you."

"I'm hurting either way." She replies instantly, the quickest quip she had ever thrown my way that spirals me into silence.

"What's your name?" I ask, my tongue tainted of hesitance as it would have been the first realquestion i'd attempt to bring to light.

Silence.

"Wanda." She whispers, it was barely audible—but it was there. "You?"

"Lexa."

It starts with her name, our conversations teetering back and forth between casuality and little personal questions as another week passes. By the end of it, she had told me about her brother— the boy i'd see walking with her one some days. She'd tell me that she could move things with her mind, and that he was faster than the speed of light and i'd sit there in a little bubble of awe because for the first time, I didn't feel alone.

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I told her of my abilities, of my own little sister and she'd tell me about her shows and her favorite little things. She said she loved rings, that they've made her take them o since she got there and that her hands felt empty. She told me about her parents, about Tony Stark, she told me about the way she loved her food a little bit too spicy even when her brother hated it and she told me that some nights, she has dreams that feel real to the touch.

And I'd tell her i'd have them too.

And we'd sit there for hours, going over every little thing and she'd hum the tune when my words begin to slow and my lids begin to sink and I'd tell her goodnight, she'd never say it back—but she didn't need to. I didn't mind-because she was my friend. She felt real, so real— almost like we could exist the same way. She was a little puddle of light, her and her frail, so voice and gentle hums and i'd wake up with a small spark of excitement with a little list of things i'd wait the entire day to ask her about.

"Would you have talked to me if we met somewhere else?" She asks out of the blue as I was mindlessly fiddling with a crumpled piece of paper. My hands still, a small smile creeping onto my lips.

"I think maybe we could have been friends." I hum, trying my best to sound as nonchalant as possible while waiting for a reply.

"Friends." She reiterates so ly, gently.

Then one day they took her out— and she didn't come back.

And I waited by the door in the mornings, and by the vents at night. She didn't come back for days, and when they'd take me out for those tests my eyes would scan down every room, every corridor hoping I wasn't wrong. Hoping she didn't just become another body in a pile of thousands that have been discarded like they were nothing—because she wasn't nothing, she was anything and everything but. With every passing day, I grew more and more despondent— more and more uneasy, angry, resentful until one a ernoon, a er an especially exhausting and torturous test— I see him.

# Strucker.

With all impulses blurred, I grab him by the throat right as he passes me. All the guards immediately try to pry my grip, but I was fuelled by so much hatred— so much worry that I held him higher, his feet li ing from the ground as he squirms in my grip.

"Where is she?" I see he as his hands claw at mind, his passage restricting with every passing second as the sound of gunshots echo through.

The bullets were going right through me, boring a scorching hole that barely moved my stance. Strucker's hollow eyes were set on me, not a glimmer of fear or mercy behind his dark orbs as I toss him agains the wall— crashing back with a loud thud as the guards rush to help him to his feet. Restraints were wrapped around my limbs almost instantly as my eyes unwaver from his face.

"You killed her." I practically growl, lunging forward so forcefully that all five men who were trying to keep me back stumble forward.

"I would never kill my greatest weapon." Strucker says with chilling calmness as i'm hastily dragged away.

That time, they didn't bring me back to my cell. That time, they threw me in a pitch black room and le . I had no way to tell the days apart, sitting in darkness for what felt like an eternity was nearly maddening. No sense of night and day, no sense of passing time--- it was like I was floating, dri ing into nothingness. The only light i'd ever see were the little slots in the door they'd slide the food trays in - mere seconds of the outside seeping in.

When you're le in darkness, in deafening silence with no light, no conversation, nothing but the sound of your own thoughts, it could be one of the most dangerous things in the world. Never have I ever wanted the chance to end everything than I did in that room, some days— if it were even days, I'd get the strongest urge to bash my skull in just to silence my mind. It's dark and exhausting- and nothing felt real. Not even me.

So i'd hum.

I'd hum the same tune Wanda did, and it wouldn't put me to sleep the way it did before but it flooded the space enough for me to find even a mere shred of sanity. I'd hum until my throat burned and my bones shook, because it was better than being aware of what was around me. It was better than losing myself entirely.

When they finally let me out, the florescent burned into my skull with the heat of a thousand fires. Every single noise was heightened, every word, ever conversation was overwhelming enough to make me heave the entire way back to my old cell. I kept my eyes wired shut, my feet dragging against the cold, hard floors as I fall to my knees within the familiar confines, hunched over with my face buried in my hands to try and ease the scorching pain the lights above brought.

"Turn o the lights!" I scream, the base of my palm digging harshly into my sockets as I crawl to the door, my fists colliding with the thick metal. I can feel the material denting under the impact, the jolting pain shooting up my arm and yet, it was all to no avail.

It was like nobody heard me at all.

With sweat and exhaustion blanketing me whole, I find my way back to my spot right next to the vent. I didn't have any intentions of trying, at that point I had somewhat accepted the bitter fact staring me right in the face. She wasn't coming back. The first person to ever make me feel normal, to ever feel real enough to exist with me was gone and I felt idiotic, naive to even think that for a single moment, the universe could be kind enough to let me have such a luxury. Loneliness was a tragedy made entirely for me, a fate set in stone that won't ever bend or break and the sooner I accepted that, the less it'd hurt.

When I woke up the next morning, the alarms were blaring and gunfire tainted the air. My door was creaked wide open, with agents and doctors running up and down the hallway in a panic. I step outside with hesitance, trying to grasp any sort of comprehension. With the rising confusion and mayhem, I grab one doctor by the arm, yanking him back with a harsh pull as he swi ly turns to face me, skin glistening with sweat and eyes darting frantically.

"What's going on?" I ask sternly, my grip around him tightening as he struggles to keep his glasses perched upon his nose.

"We need to leave. The avengers, they've come. They've come to kill us all." He says, the distress in his voice bleeding through as I finally release him, watching him blend into the commotion as I rack my brain for any sort of plan. I was in no shape to fight, so the only option would have been to run.

But I can't live in question, so I dart to the neighboring room, it's doors wide open and as I expected, empty. No Wanda, no sign of anything that she had ever been there. So with my heart settling in the pit of my stomach, I bolt down the hallway in search of an exit. All defenses were on full display, I could hear the mu led sounds of screams mixing with the avid sound of shots tearing through the air. With my feet propelling me as fast as I could muster, I nearly fall on my face when I catch a glimpse of the same autumn hair in the small opening of a door.

It was like my entire body took on a mind of its own when I burst through, finally settling my gaze on the same cool, green eyes that graced me once before in passing and I finally take a breath I had been holding for the entirety of a week. As my eyes gloss over her, I realize she wasn't wearing her jumpsuit anymore, this time she was in civilian clothes- sitting right next to her brother who looked right back at me with utmost confusion.

"Who are you?" He asks, his thick, Sokovian accent filling the air as I glance between the two.

"We need to leave." Is all I o er before turning back to Wanda, who only returned nothing but cold indi erence.

"We are not going anywhere." Pietro chimes in, rising from his seat and stepping right in between Wanda and I with a hostile glare.

"Wanda." I breathe, but before I could get another word out my feet are li ed o of the ground and I feel the solid surface of the wall collide against my back. I fall to the ground in pain, chasing all the air that had been knocked out of my lungs as I li my head to find her, standing right next to her brother with wisps of red energy swirling through her fingertips.

"What are you doing?" I tried to mask the hurt in my voice, my arm wrapped around my torso as I struggle to rise to my feet.

"We are not friends. I'm not like you." Her chillingly flat voice hits my ear and with a simple flick of her wrist, i'm sent flying out of the room with the door slamming shut almost instantly.

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I was curled up on the floor of the corridor, my eyes only meeting the endless sea of hurried footsteps that didn't as much care to even glance my way. I will myself to rise again, taking one last look at the room before finally walking away. Her words leave a sour trail in my thoughts, echoing like a broken record that existed solely to taunt my stupidity. I should have never trusted her, I should have never cared. I should have known better.

So with all my pain turning into anger, I barge through the south exit of the facility, the cold air instantly hitting my skin as I take in the scene before me. It was so chaotic that I could barely even tell who was shooting at who.

Dozens of bodies, all of which were agents, had scattered on the ground, laying lifeless in puddles of their own blood as I tread past, picking up a pistol on the way-just for good measure. I look around, scanning for a way out when something in the distance pulls at my attention. A figure, a cloaked figure just standing here, half hidden behind a tree.

The figure was not engaged in battle, or scrambling for shelter. It merely stood there, watching... me I couldn't make out a face, or eyes but I felt it's lingering stare sending a chill down my spine. If my surroundings weren't so wrecked with chaos, I would have pursued it - but I had more important matters at hand.

Shaking my attention away, I hide behind the tall trees, carefully and strategically putting distance between me and the facility until the commotion was far enough for me to bolt into a run but before I could completely get away, a voice halts me in place.

"Stop!" A female voice rings above the madness, sinking me in place as I carefully turn around to find a woman, dressed in a black body suit and peppered with weapons. Her short, red hair was surprisingly kept despite the chaos as she points a pistol right at me.

I could have shot her, I could have kept running, but I could tell she was one of them. It intrigued me, because she looked a lot like some of the other girls i've met while training but there was something in her eyes, something that felt di erent. She wasn't empty, she wasn't a hollowed out shell with a gun in her hand. The eyes tell more about a person than words ever could and she was... almost obscure.

So I entertain her for a little bit.

I slowly raise my arms, feigning surrender as she motions for me to drop the gun in my hand. So I do, the thud of the heavy weapon blanketed by gunfire from a short distance away as her eyes claw to pick me apart, going over every inch of me with bleeding curiosity. I would have expected her to shoot me dead, or turn me in, but she kept her place and slowly lowered her weapon but her eyes stayed sharp, burning into me. I take her actions as an indication of safety, so with caution, I take small steps back—putting distance between us while she just... lets me.

So I give her a quick smile, then I turn around and go. I didn't know where I was headed, no mission in the horizon or men telling me what to do and where to go. I thought it would have felt free, but I felt just as caged as I was in that cell. My mind dri s back to Wanda, her cold, harsh gaze, the feeling of her magic wrapping around me and tossing me aside like I was nothing. Then and there, I found a mission for myself as I ran through the trees.

I was going to kill Wanda Maximo .

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