conference room, she wouldn't even glance my way.

lips as he eyes each of us.

For the time being a er such a horrendous attack, I was let back into the compound. Even going as far as to be given a room on the same floor as the rest— a er Natasha's vicious protests of course. Wanda hadn't spoken to me since my stunt the day prior, only shooting me disappointed glances and bitter glares. Even until now, right in the

"Forty eight men— all five of you in chains, how does that happen? Somebody better start explaining before I pop a vein and have a stroke right here." Nick exclaims, a sarcastic chuckle falling from his

"She knocked everyone out. Barricaded the doors, used some kind of

His bruises were still pretty prominent but so were everyone elses. Their wrists all still bruised and slightly burnt, cuts bandaged and

gas and—that was it." Steve breaks the deafening silence, disappointment dripping from his tone as he hung his head low.

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bruises glowing a thick shade of purple. I couldn't look at anyone without feeling an immense pang of guilt consuming me to the core, reminding me of what i've caused over and over. "And you all fell for it? No inkling that it was a trap? At all?" Nick's disbelief was astoundingly evident, darting his gaze over every one of us as he desperately tried to make sense of things. "She wasn't alone." Natasha chimes in from right next to me. "We came in and she was in the warehouse. On the stage, half of backup came in with us and the other half stayed outside to surround the area." Natasha further explained a story she had laid out for me on the ride back from London. "Then someone— something took out our men outside and the doors were suddenly blocked and gas filled the room. That was it." Natasha finishes with a sigh, slumping into her seat with defeat. "Yeah. When we came to— Lexa was there trying to get us out. That's all we remember." James chimes in, sending me a small nod as he spoke. "So you're telling me, there's more like them?" Nick motions to me, hands propped onto the table as the entire team only keeps their "The corrector." I finally speak, probably for the first time that day as everyone turns to look at me. "The what?" Nick reiterates as a sigh escapes from my lips. I haven't spoken a word about the hotel room, about the man who attacked me. Admittedly, a er the events of yesterday it completely slipped my mind. I was doused in panic and nightmares the whole night a er that I barely even crossed my thoughts—but as everyone was recapping the events that led to the warehouse, the memory played in my head like a gleaming beam of light I completely walked "There was a man sent to my hotel to kill me. It's how I knew the whole thing was a trap. He wasn't enhanced, didn't work for HYDRA either. He was just hired by somebody called the Corrector." I hash out, feeling the stares of confusion flood my way. "Did he give you a name?" Nick questions, but I only shake my head. "All I know is that it's a woman. The guy who tried to kill me said it was a woman." I reply tiredly. "Well did you at least get a description of the woman?" Nick pursues further, irritation shining through his tone as he keeps his gaze firmly on me. "No. I was too busy trying to make sure everyone wasn't dead." I snap, my words slipping harsher than expected as I will myself to calm down. "So all we know is that somebody else is pulling the strings and we just lost forty eight men. Great." He hu s, pushing himself o the

table as the door swings open. A man I didn't seem to recognize walks in, dressed to the nines in a grey suit that matched his hair. He was followed by a group of men, riddled from head to toe in heavy armor as Natasha, Steve— and Wanda immediately shoot up from their seats. Nick releases a sarcastic chuckle, almost like he couldn't believe what was happening as confusion continues to engulf me. "You've gotta be kidding me." Nick mumbles as the man looks directly at me, eyeing me blankly as my brows twitch into a furrow. "You're not taking her, Ross." Natasha was first to speak up, her stern tone flowing through the air with a distinct sharpness as I look up at her. "What happened in London does not cancel out her crimes against this country." The man, who I assumed to be Ross, spoke with such

arrogance that my skin immediately shivers with irritation. "You're out of line here, man." James sighs, eventually rising to his feet. As the tension continued to thicken, I eventually get up as well, keeping my eyes on Ross who stared me down ruthlessly. "She is a criminal." Ross says incredulously, looking around the room in dishelief. "If it wasn't for her, we'd all be dead. She saved our lives." Steve chimes in, keeping his tone cordial yet cold all at once. "If it wasn't for her, nobody would be dead and yet—forty eight men are." He almost laughs as his words cut to my bone. I knew exactly what I had caused I knew exactly the extent of my responsibilities, that every body, every life that went up in flames was on nobody but me. Nearly fi y families, sunken into grief and loss.

Nearly fi y men, fathers, brothers, sons were taken all to get to me. The visual kept me up all night, flashing in my head like some torturous, broken projector that kept replaying the same horrific movie over and over. I knew it all—I felt it all. "It would have been fi v three without her. She's not a threat to us." Maria, much to my surprise, speaks up as she takes Nick's side by the head of the table. "You want her, you go through us. All of us. I'm sure you— or your men, wouldn't want that." Wanda threatens, her blazing glare shooting through Ross as I watch his face slowly take in that everybody was serious. Serious about keeping me. "I've got forty eight families calling me and i'm trying to haul ass to challenging gaze piercing through Ross.

get everything pieced together just to have something to tell them. Now, if you will, we need to get back to work." Nick speaks up, his "This isn't over, Fury. You know it. You can keep me at bay now, but not for long. She's a ticking time bomb and in time—it'll cost us all again. Maybe more." Ross seethes, turning on his heel and beckoning his goons to follow him out of the room. Everyone visibly relaxed the moment he was gone— everyone but me. His words float through my head, echoing an agonizing sound over and over. He was right, every word was spot on. I was more like a bomb than anything else, some sort of magnet for death and destruction. No matter how much I try, no matter what path I choose, someone is always going to get hurt. It may not be me, but there's always a price to pay and quite frankly, i'd rather take all the blows than watch innocent people get caught in the crossfire of my mess. "Excuse me." I mumble, briskly exiting the room despite the looks of confusion. My chest was caving in, the thick bile of guilt covering every inch of my entirety like dirt I could never wash o . All of those families— I can only imagine the calls Nick was getting. All the lives lost just to fix what I broke. There was nobody else to blame for Lara other than me and I couldn't help but think that maybe if I had just toughed it out and stayed, If I had just let things run their course then maybe she wouldn't have done what she did. Maybe our mother would have been right. If I had only let Lara go that night, none of this would have happened. It was a storm of rapid emotions coursing through me as I bolted down the empty corridor, anger, disgust, guilt, agony all mixing within my gut as I step into the elevator and press for the only floor that would ever have a shot at easing the screams penetrating my skull. The doors open to a long hallway, dimly lit and smelling of musk as I step out and venture down. I turn the corner, coming face to face with

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the only door in that entire floor that could get me to where I want to go. Two guards stood, covered in armor and looking ahead almost robotically as I approached. The moment I get close enough, one of them steps in my path and places a firm hand on my chest. "You're not permitted to be here." He says lowly, his flat, emotionless voice piercing my ears as I look back at him with furrowed brows. 'Get your hand o of me." I mutter through gritted teeth, never taking my eyes o of the guard as he stands his ground. "Not until you leave." He says. "That's my sister in there, now let me in." I reply sternly, bringing us to a stand o where neither of us move a muscle until the speaker clutched to the corner of the ceiling clicks on. "Let her through." Maria's voice bleeds through the speakers, instantly causing the guard to let up and step aside as the doors automatically unlock. I brush past them harshly, walking through the thick, double doors that eventually led me to some sort of laboratory. Crisp white walls that contrasted the dark colors in the corridor that led to it, almost masking the fact that we were twenty feet beneath the ground as all of the doctors and additional guards turned to me. "Lexa Kovacs." A woman broke the uneasy silence, approaching me without a hint of hesitation and extending a hand out once she stops at arm's reach.

"Jess Barrett. I'm the—psychologist assigned to your sister's case." She introduces, o ering me a small smile. She stood in a long white coat over black slacks and a maroon blouse, glasses perched upon her nose and blonde hair cascading down to her shoulders. She looked merely a few years older, standing there clutching a pad to her chest as she waited for me to take her hand. I only stare at her blankly, not really knowing how to react at the situation because of course, Lara would be studied like some sort of lab rat. She did just mercilessly murder forty eight men. "Okay, uhm— i'm actually glad you're here. I've been meaning to speak to you." She clears her throat, leading me through the busy room and into a door on the le hand corner that led to an o ice. I subtly scan the room, the abundance of white on the walls making my stomach turn. It reminded me of hospitals, the color and flourescents. It reminded me of death—but admittedly, everything does now. No matter where I find myself, my mind always dri s back to it like it had some sort of pull on me. It was exhausting to continuously try and keep my head above water, to try and not drown into the insanity of what was happening around me. "You can... take a seat." Jess reluctantly says, motioning to the chair in front of the desk that I assume to be hers as she settles into the chair behind it. "I want to see her." I say, keeping on my feet as Jess looks back at me in slight surprise. "Yeah, you will. I just need to ask you a few questions so I can... understand her better. She's refusing to speak to anyone." Jess says, a hint of dismay swimming behind her tone. "And what makes you think you'll get anything out of me?" I question flatly, my unfaltering gaze towering over her as she shrugs lightly. "Because I know you want to help her." Jess says almost matter of

factly, going to flip through some of the files on her desk as I give in and take a seat upon the chair. I wait there with a scowl, arms crossed over my chest as she goes through the papers and settles onto a singular page. I was never fond of doctors— with good reason. All if not most that i've encountered were selfish, insentive and cruel. Watching through the glass as people su er, scribbling on their little pads regardless of what they've done. They make my skin crawl. "Can you tell me more about your parents?" Jess asks, adjusting the glasses on her nose as she looks at me. "How old are you?" I counter, completely ignoring her question. "I—I'm 28." She answers uncomfortably, slightly taken aback by my words as I trace my eyes over her features with a looming hint of suspicion. "You're young." I hum, raising a brow. "I get that a lot. That doesn't mean i'm not qualified." She swilly replies, glancing back down at the open file perched before her. "So can you—" "Ms. Barret, I came here to talk to my sister. Not to have an impromptu therapy session." I cut her o hastily, making a move to get up out of the chair when she shoots up as well. "Maybe we can talk— when you're free? In a less— stressful environment." She tries to call out, my hand on the knob and feet frozen as I look over my shoulder at her, barely grazing her with my vision as the air thickens. "Mavbe." I swing the door open, walking back out and heading right for the door I knew I needed to go through. The only door in that room that was made of thick metal, intimidating bolts that looked like they belonged to a bank safe that held gold bars. The only thing that room

held—was a fragment of a nightmare I unwillingly created. I could practically the guards tense up as I approach, but this time none of them make a move to stop me as I turn the handle and push the door

with ease.

I step into the brightly lit room, split in half by thick, armor grade glass with only a speaker hanging in two corners. There she was, sitting on the ground with her head hung back against the frame of her bed— all changed out of her gear and wearing a black jumper that made her look more like a criminal than I could have imagined. All she had was a bed and a chair in the corner, nothing else. She doesn't notice my presence immediately and in that moment of vulnerability, I can see the defeat and anger on her face. Pure despair, swimming in her features as I begin to approach with my heart lodged in my throat. "Is this what you wanted?" She says, voice bleeding through the speaker above while she doesn't even bother to look my way as her arms rested lazily upon her bent knees. "This was never what I wanted for you." I breathe shakily, coming to a stop just steps away from the glass. She laughs bitterly, turning her head to finally settle her eyes on me as her dark hair cascaded messily, framing the hatred that was rooted so deeply in her features. It almost hurt to look at her, to see her and not recognize a single thing. It felt like a dream that had been tainted by reality, torn apart and set aflame before me. "Well this is what you've done." She says, moving to get to her feet as she approaches me. "This is what you've always done, isn't it? You leave and when you've got nothing to come back to, you throw me in here. Are you that pathetic that you have to lock me up just for me to give you the time of day?" She seethes, her glare could strike me in place through the glass with its ferocity, with its pure, torturous origin. in confusion.

"You killed them all, Lara." I sigh, shaking my head as she looks at me "So did you. I'm just like you— and yet i'm the only one in here. You've outdone yourself this time, you really have." She chuckles mockingly, turning on her heel to pace as she begins to applaud. "Lexa the fucking hero. Lexa the martyr—going around telling everyone you were trying to save weak old me. How about you fix the story, Lexa? How about you tell everyone the truth." She spits, stomping closer until she was only an inch away from the glass. "You were a coward. We lost everything and you took the easy way out, leaving me with promises that I actually believed. You had me fooled for a while, too." She clicks her tongue, a menacing smirk plastered on her lips as her eyes stay firmly on mine. "I wasn't lying, Lara!" I scream in frustration, my bones shaking with hurt as I look back at her. "They were going to kill both of you. Nobody walks away from HYDRA alive—not without a fight!" I hu, running a hand through my hair as I tear my eyes away from her. "Liar!" Lara screams, ramming her fist to the glass that doesn't even shake. "You're a liar!" She keeps screaming, over and over as she throws punches. Her blood begins to print on the glass as tears brim my eyes begging her to stop but my words only fly through her. She keeps going, she keeps pounding until the glass is smeared with red and

guards are rushing in, trying to escort me out of the room as they order her to calm down. I let them take me out, tears streaming down my face as Lara's mu led screams seep through the cracks of the thick doors. I can feel everyone's eyes on me, doctors whispering and murmuring like a bunch of leeches until my eyes spot Jess. Jess who stood by the door to her o ice, a file pressed to her chest as she only looks back at me sadly. I storm out of the room, bolting down the dim corridors and stepping back into the elevator as my chest caves and body aches. The moment it opens up to my floor, my hands are shaking as I step out and practically run to my room, feeling like the fire was inching behind me once again. My head was going a million miles an hour— and it was really hard to breathe. Hard like no matter how much air you try and take in, it still feels like you're su ocating, like you're drowning. No matter how many times you feel your heartbeat or press on your pulse, it still feels like everything inside you has been emptied out and replaced with thick bile that keeps sinking you into yourself. The moment I step through my door, hoping, begging for any kind of serenity to the screams in my head, my eyes land on Wanda who was sitting at the edge of my bed and fiddling with her rings. Her eyes snap up to meet mine, instantly bringing her to her feet as a sigh falls from my lips. "I can't— I can't do this right now. You can be mad at me later, I just not right now, Wanda." I quickly push out, stepping around her hastily as I fall into the armchair situated in the corner, my head immediately burying into my hands as my brain pounds against my skull.

"We need to talk." Wanda presses, a hint of worry mixing beneath her stern tone as her footsteps draw near. "Oh you want to talk to me now?" I snap, looking up at her with frustration seeping through my entirety as she stills into place, stunned at my outburst. "What? Go on, I know what you want to say. Can you just—go back to glaring at me from a distance. I can't deal with you today." It falls from my lips like a sharp blade cutting through the thick atmosphere, I can see the hurt and confusion flashing in her eyes as she stammers for a reply. "What happened?" Is all she manages to croak out, but it only frustrates me more. "What happened is I fucked up, again! People died, again! Everyone died—" "We didn't." She cuts me o . "You could have!" I exclaim, my tone shaking the room as Wanda stood in disbelief and concern. "You could have. You almost did. Don't you get it? This is what i've been trying to tell you." I rise to my feet, heaving amidst the scorching trail of words falling from my lips. "Ross was right- everyone who ever looked at me like I was anything other than a walking timebomb was wrong. Natasha was wrong, Steve was wrong, youwere wrong." I seethe as my heart shatters in place, Wanda looking back at me with an unreadable expression on her face. "I know you want to call me a coward for what I did— what I tried to do so just spit it out and get it over with like the rest of them!" I exclaim. "I was never going to say that." Wanda replies so ly, so so ly as she stood there with her head hung and shoulders slumped like a child who had been scolded. I would have cared if I wasn't in so much pain, I would have seen her. But I don't. "But you were thinking it. That's why you didn't talk to me— I could see it in your eyes. Maybe you think it was cowardly, pathetic but I started this mess and for a split second I thought, just thought that I could end it with me." I explain in frustration, finally tearing my eyes away to move back into the chair with a tired hu. "It wouldn't have solved anything." She tries again, the desperation shining through her words but I only shake my head.

"It would have. It would have for me." I mumble bitterly.

finally, the sound of her footsteps ring through the room.

The door opens and shuts—then i'm alone again. Sitting in the

It was the lowest i've ever been, a whole nother layer below rock bottom. I barely got a wink of sleep, Lara's screams plaguing my mind along with the guilt of all I've caused. It was like a light that wouldn't stop flashing, just throbbing and blinding me over and over. I ignore every knock, decline every voice— even Steve's, when he stood outside my door for about half an hour trying to convince me to eat

dinner with a list of health benefits he probably read about

I toss and turn in my bed, covered in cold sweat with screams plaguing me every time I close my eyes. Have you ever done something so—so horrible, caused something so agonizing and

corner of a room that never felt like my own, exactly like how I arrived here the first time. I sat there for what felt lile forever, my head in my hands and my mind stuck in a torturous loop as tears keep streaming

She was walking out.

from my face.

"Just go. Whatever this is— should have never existed. So leave. You did the right thing yesterday, pushing me away and keeping your distance. So do it again— and don't stop! I finally breathe, still refusing to look at her but I could still feel her anyway. I could feel her pain— her disbelief, I could feel her eyes burning through me until

know that there was no way in the universe you could ever make up for all that you hurt? That you could rip your breaking heart from your chest, peel the skin o of your bones and drown yourself in a sea of your tears and it still wouldn't come close? It was the highest form of torture there is. Guilt was the most painful bullet to ever break through me. It was the wound that would never heal, that would tear wider and wider with every passing second because there was no way I could take it all back. No way I could bring those men to life— no way I could erase the cuts, the bruises, the horrendous experience from anyone who survived. Every time I look at the team, at Wanda, I see fire. I see flames and burning skin, I hear pained screams and pleading voices. Every time I look at them, I remember. I remember and I needed to, even for a split second, forget because I was actively going insane. I was going crazy, I felt like the memories were alive and tearing me apart from inside out. I rip the covers o of my body, the sheet drenched in sweat as I sat there in a tank top and shorts and yet I was still covered. With my chest panting and bones shaking, I stagger out of bed. The walls were closing in again and it was getting hard to breathe, so I got up and headed for the door in a panic. I nearly trip over a tray placed out by the hall, filled with food that was already cold and I assume, was le I step over the tray, my bare feet touching the cold floor as I walk aimlessly down the hallway. The last time I was here, I was like a test rat lost in a maze. It still felt the same. I couldn't go to Steve or Natasha or Wanda, I couldn't look at any of them without my heart breaking so I just—kept walking. Kept turning corners, switching levels and jogging down flights of stairs only to end up in corridors that look exactly the same but at least I had space, at least I was moving. I turn down another corner, my feet aching and bones straining but I didn't care— no. I deserved the discomfort. I needed it. Right when I thought I was alone, one of the doors open just as I'm walking by, nearly slamming into me if I hadn't caught it with my hand. In the mess of things, Jess walks out of the room, hair slightly less proper and now wearing a dark blue, button up blouse instead of the lab coat she had on earlier. She was stunned, eyes widened and rambling apology a er apology as she held a stack of papers to her chest.

"It's fine. I'm fine." I flatly cut in, waving her o a she nods with

"You're still awake?" She asks as I close the door, properly that time

"And you're still here." I hum coldly, exhaling a so sigh as I look up at

awkwardly, standing on the receiving end of my chilling, emotionless

whatever it is now." I step around her, taking a step to continue on my

"Where are you going?" She asks, stopping me in my tracks only a few

"Right." I mumble, turning around and brushing past her as the patter

This is— normal for me. I work late most nights." She says

"And I don't sleep anymore. Have a... good night, or morning—

"That's a dead end, Ms. Kovacs." She points out, causing me to actually look where I was headed only to find that she was right.

aimless journey when her voice rings through the air.

apologetic reluctance.

her.

gaze.

feet away.

"That's none of your business."

while we were le standing out in the hall.

of her footsteps echo through the silence, trying to match my pace. God, it felt like I had a puppy following me, only this one wore glasses and has a PhD. "Can I walk with you?" She asks, the click of heels bouncing o the walls as I sigh. "You're not giving me much of a choice." I reply coldly, keeping my eyes ahead. "Why can't you sleep?" She asks a er a few moments of silence and I'm le absolutely hating how long that corridor was. "Why can't you shut up?" I snap, immediately feeling a rush if guilt surge through me when she o ers me sheepish silence at my outburst. "Sorry." I mumble, shaking my head lightly as she only hums in return. "I—I get these really vivid nightmares when I close my eyes. Memories of what happened yesterday." I give in a er a while, my voice was hoarse and weak, almost in a whisper as I feel her eyes tracing over the side of my face. "When was the last time you slept?" She asks with caution, probably trying to avoid me snapping at her again as I take in a deep breath and shrug. "I don't know— three, four days ago? It's been... a rough week." I breathe shakily, running my fingers through my hair as we finally turn the corner. "I can only imagine." Jess sighs, both of us coming to a stop at the elevators. "It's just... the dreams feel too real sometimes. I can't figure out if i'm dreaming or if it's... I don't understand it." I breathe a heavy hu, digging my hands into my pockets as Jess glances my way. "Look at a clock." She says nonchalantly, like it was a normal reply to give. She picks up on my confusion, a small laugh falling from her lips as she opens her mouth to speak. "If you're not sure if you're dreaming or not, look for a clock. I learned

that trick a few years ago. Time works di erently in dreams, our subconscious can never replicate it so... just look for a clock." She

"I could give you something that would maybe help?" She o ers before I could say anything mor as she presses the button to go

"Are you o ering me drugs, Ms. Barrett?" I raise a brow and she instantly shakes her head, it was almost funny how puzzled she

"I don't know if you know but my body doesn't exactly work

I take a moment to think about it, eventually coming to the

conclusion that she was right. It was worth a shot if it meant i'd get some peace of mind, especially a er everything that happened. I mean, what's the worst that could happen? It's not like it could kill

"What floor is your room on? I have to get them from my o ice. I can get them to you a er." She says, o ering me a small, tight lipped

"Fourth. Uh— the third door on the right. You keep sleeping pills in your o ice?" I question lightly as she taps the button for my floor,

carefully stepping back by my side as she laughs so ly.

her blue eyes through thick framed glasses.

"Yeah— yeah okay. I'll take you up on that."

Nothing could, unfortunately.

normally. I'd probably need ten of those pills to even feel a tinge." I reply, watching as she hesitates to press a button and turns to me.

"You can try. I'll give you a handful for now and if it doesn't work then — no harm done, right?" She o ers again, looking back at me with

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"No! No— I meant like over the counter sleeping aids. Nothing illegal. It's really unhealthy for your body to be conscious for days on end." She clarifies in a slight panic as the doors ding open and we both step

down, earning my eyes as I look back at her curiously.

explains with a small shrug.

looked.

inside.

smile.

"Like I said, I work late that sometimes I have to force myself to rest. My body has built up some sort of tolerance to it now, though. Only works on me once a week." She shares as the doors open and I eventually step around her, heading out while she stood her ground. "What's the catch?" I ask, pressing a hand on the door slits to keep the elevator from closing as she smiles back at me. "You give me a chance. That's it. One conversation." She replies, expectant eyes trailing my face as I eventually nod. "One conversation." I agree, retracting my hand as the doors slide shut. Maybe one conversation wouldn't hurt, one conversation with the only person in the entire building who didn't sink me into a sea of guilt just by existing. As much as I didn't want to admit it, walking with Jess was the one time my head wasn't completely consuming me. I turn down the corridor, stopping at my door as I take a deep breath before walking inside to find Wanda sitting on the edge of my bed, just like how she did this morning except this time, she had something in her hands. "Wanda." I sigh, instantly feeling my heart sink as I shut the door behind me. "Before you tell me to leave—I got you this." She rises to her feet, approaching me as the only illumination that graced her skin was the moonlight pouring through the windows behind her. She holds out her hands, shaky and frail as I finally recognize what was in her grasp. It was the book— A Picture of Dorian Gray, the one from Natasha's apartment. I take the item from her hands, gracing her cold, ringed fingers as I trace my eyes over the cover. "You went back?" I breathe shakily, feeling like I was thrown into a fever dream as my fingertips trail over the hard cover. "I didn't know what else to do." Wanda reveals in defeat, her voice floating through the air with such cautious delicacy as I look back up to meet her eyes.

me to be— a friend, a..." She stammers, her hands gently cupping mine as I kept the book in my shaky grasp. Her touches used to feel divine, like serenity and warmth but now now it only burns. It only scorches, tears and hurts. I pull away in a same as she did to me before all of this. Before it all fell apart. arms snake around my waist from behind. be enough. This used to be a dream, a dream that would give me butterflies and make my heart feel like it held the most intricate galaxies within—but now it felt torturous. I felt dirty, diseased, infected and just feeling her skin on mine made my chest cave and stomach churn. Hot, burning tears fall from my eyes, tracing down my cheeks and skin but I feel for it almost absentmidedly. I wire my eyes shut, my breaths hitching as I slip it o and try to fite o the sobs daring to escape. small indent pressed into me, already disappearing with every my stomach, prying o her grip and moving away to turn to her.

"Why are you doing this? Why can't you just go back to hating me?" It falls from my lips in a tremble as I choke back the tears daring to brim

"Because I can't. I want to be here, for you. I'll be whatever you need

my eyes.

wince, my breath hitching in my throat as I deviate from her eyes to step around her. I set the book down onto the bed, keeping my back to Wanda as my eyes wired shut in pain. God, I wanted her to feel the "Please just let me stay." She pleads, footsteps drawing near as her I can feel her forehead pressed to my nape, her pained breaths, her trying to pull me in so close like holding me in her arms would never over my lips as my fingers feel for the ring that still settled at the base.

It's the only piece of jewelry I keep on, barely even warm against my The air feels flush against my skin, right where the ring used to sit. A passing second as I shakily slip my hands in between her arms and She's crying too— half of her face peppered with the blue moonlight as tears streaked down her pale skin. She was still so beautiful, even with all those bruises and bandages, her eyes still held the universe. Only, I wasn't sure it was mine to be in anymore. Against my screaming bones, I reach out with shaky hands, cupping her cheek with as much tenderness as I could muster as she melts into my touch instantly. It almost feels foreign, like just days ago she wasn't in my arms, or curled up in my lap in the middle of New York

a City, or holding my hand at the edge of a roo op. She feels cold, frail heartbreaking relief that comes with my touch—but I also feel every She grabs onto my wrist, almost like she was begging me to keep it in place as I look at her, tracing over every feature like tomorrow would thumb shakily traces over her tears, wiping it away with reluctance as tears as I watch her tremble beneath my grasp. It hurt so much more—because she was right. "You love me and I—" "Please. Please don't say it. Please." I cut her o in a desperate plea,

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in my hands like the slightest tremble would turn her into dust. With my free hand, I find hers in the darkness. I can almost feel the piece of her shatter when I press the ring into her palm and let go. never come. "It hurts to touch you." I whisper amidst my tears, watching as she closes her eyes like I had just pierced a knife through her chest. My she kept her eyes closed. "You love me— I heard you. I heard you at the warehouse. You love me." She stutters desperately, her hands still around my own, pleading to keep it in place. Her words deepen the cracks, fuel the

watching as she opens her eyes, all the green swimming in a sea of dark despair as she looks back at me. mumble, my breathing stilled along with the world around us as she She steps away, defeat sweeping over her features as she takes a look around. Her little sni les fill the air as she wipes at her eyes, taking a expression, all I can see was the pain I put her through— the horrors I ground, watching helplessly as she swings it open and reveals Jess, a

"You know that I do." She mutters. "Please don't say it. You're going to break my heart." I shakily drops her hands— and I do the same. "You're breaking mine." deep breath as she takes one last look at me. I can't read her caused. Then she turns away, heading for the door as I stood my hand balled up into a fist like she was just about to knock. "Oh— Ms. Maximo . Sorry, I thought this was Lexa's room." Jess stammers as Wanda glances back at me almost coldly. "It is." Wanda replies so ly, stepping around her and disappearing down the hall as Jess finally sees me amidst the darkness. I quickly wipe at my eyes, heading to the door as I clear my throat in an attempt to hide the fact that I was entirely and completely falling apart.

"Was it a bad time?" Jess asks worriedly, almost apologetically as I shake my head. "No, she— was just leaving." I reply, taking a deep breath as Jess holds up a small prescription bottle. "Try taking five. It's non lethal, even in heavy doses the most it could do is make you feel hazy." She says so ly as I take the item from her grasp, looking down as the pills rattle against the container.

smile and I only nod in return, shutting the door and clicking the lock I look back at myself through the mirror, the bags under my eyes, my did what was best, that Wanda hating me— that her staying away was better than having her in my arms. I'd rather walk the earth knowing

"Yeah— yeah thanks, Ms. Barrett." I sigh. "It's just Jess. I— hope it works. Good night, Lexa." She o ers a sad before heading to the bathroom. tear stained cheeks and pu y lids. I was trying to convince myself I she was alive, than be selfish and put her at risk any more. I twist the bottle open, shaking out a handful of pills onto my palm before taking a breath and popping them into my mouth. I grab the empty glass by the sink, filling it with water from the tap and washing

the medicine down my throat with the hope that maybe this time, I Continue reading next part  $\ \square$ 

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could take it all back. Maybe this time.