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"Why do you watch this so much?" Lara quips from beside me, wearing her sunflower dress with a mess of pads and paints covering

the floor before her.

We were sitting in the living room, our mother upstairs—locked in her bedroom since the start of the day. I promised Lara we'd play later in the a ernoon and luckily, she may have forgotten since she was so enamored by drawing that she had stopped pestering me to go I was on the couch, curled up with a pillow pressed to my chest and tears brimming my eyes as A Walk to Remembeplayed on the screen while Lara looked up at me with her brows quirked and fingers covered in colors like she had just waded through a rainbow. "Because I like it." I mumble amidst little sni les that I tried to keep subtle. A small smile peppers Lara's face as she crawls up to the couch, taking the spot beside me as she reaces over to wipe my tears with her little, colorful hands. "S'Okay to cry." She mumbles with a tender smile, smearing her colors all over my face as I squirm beneath her touch. "Stop—Lara!" I complain, stifling a laugh as she bursts into a fit of giggles. "See? Now you look pretty. You don't have to cry anymore." She beams as I click the television o, getting a blurry view of my reflection through the pitch black screen and quite frankly, I looked like a melting party clown. "I love it! Come here and give me a hug!" I fake a smile, watching her eyes light up almost in disbelief as I open my arms. "Really?" Lara breathes happily, nearly tossing herself into my embrace when I flip us over, putting my weight on top of her as I dip my fingers on the paints below and smear it on her little face as revenge. "Really!" I exclaim amidst laughter, Lara trying to fight me o, thrashing beneath my grip as rolls of giggles fall from her lips. Eventually, I let up and get o of her but only when she looks even worse than me. Nearly most of her face was a mix of green and red, even going over her eyebrows and lips as she gets a glimpse of herself on the television screen's reflection. Lara squeaks at the sight, bringing her hands up to her paint covered face almost in disbelief as she continues to stifle her laughter. She breathes happily, plopping back down onto the couch as I watch her with an adoring smile. "A pretty one. Maybe even prettier than me." I wiggle my brows, watching her smirk grow even fonder at my words. "We look pretty." Lara agrees in a proud nod, shi ing to lay her head down on my lap as the entirety of her little body stretches out the length of the sofa. "We do." I hum, absentmindedly running my fingers through her hair I click the television back on through the remote. "So why do you watch that so much if it keeps making you cry?" Lara circles back to her original question, looking up at me with big, curious eyes as I hum in thought. "Because I adore the kind of love they have." I reply simply. I thought it to be the bravest love of all, to give somebody your heart despite knowing how it ends. Some would argue that risking in the face of fate and mystery was a lot harder—but I care to disagree. It's much more torturous to know how it all ends, to know, for an inevitable, unchangeable fact that you're going to lose them anyway and to choose to still lay your heart on the line solely based on the promise of a love that was meant to die. a It was almost admirable, in a painful way. To love somebody with such purity, such selflessness that even though they cannot provide you with the gleaming hope of forever, whatever time spent with them would hold a love that spans lifetimes. It's bittersweet— divine, agonizing and still so beautiful at the same time that it makes me wonder what it would feel like to love someone that much. To love someone for all they are, for all the time you are allowed with no grievances or selfishness. "Doesn't she die?" Lara blurts out, the word completely unphazing her. Lara had learned about death at an early age and being the smart little girl that she is, understood it immediately. "She does." I nod, only further confusing her. a "And he still marries her? Even if he knows she's going to die?" She questions almost reluctantly, like she was trying to gauge if I understood how it sounded. "He does." I smile down at her. "Why? Why would he want someone he can't have forever?" She asks, face contorted into confusion as she looks back at me. "Because he doesn't need it. He loves her so much that he doesn't need forever— whatever time they're given is enough. I think it's really sweet." I casually reply, a small shrug falling from my shoulders. "That's... still sad." Lara hums so ly. "You can look at it that way— yeah. Or you could look at it like— like a love that's so powerful, even time can't tear it apart. What they had in that short amount of time is more than what people get in a whole lifetime, you can also see that." I reply, my fingers still tracing through her hair as she hums in thought. I can see the gears turning behind her eyes, taking in what i've just said as she slowly nods. "Jasmine's sister drove us yesterday and she said something on the phone to her boyfriend." Lara shares out of the blue. "She called him a hopeless... romantic?" She draws out uncertainly, looking up at me for guidance as I o er her a little nod. "Mhmm." "So I asked her what it meant and she said it's somebody who... believes in love. Like—like someone who loves... love." She struggles to explain, much to my amusement as I only hum lightly and urge her to continue. "I think you're like that." She finishes, looking up at me. "Really? Me? I don't see it." I click my tongue, the idea floating around in my head as Lara shi s to crawl o my lap and back onto the floor. "I do. I like it." I smile to myself, thinking maybe she was right. Maybe someday i'd find it— maybe it won't always be this bleak. Maybe i'd get a great love story of my own once things settle down, i'd find someone I love more than time, more than life and i'd be happy. When I look at my parents, the distance and resentment, it almost feels terrifying. It's like there's that striking fear in me that i'm destined for the same fate, stuck in a house in the suburbs with somebody that feels like a stranger. But I don't want a stranger. I want someone who makes my heart leap, who makes my knees weak and my bones shake. I want someone who feels warm, who holds my hand through the brightest of days and darkest of nights. I just wanted someone who fits, maybe not like the movies—but something for myself, for once. a Maybe someday, when things get better. a New York, U.S.A. 2015 It actually worked. Well, I took more than five pills but it worked. I don't even remember dri ing o, I only remember waking up to the sunlight hitting my face and Natasha knocking relentlessly on my door. I stumble out of bed, my hair a mess and my eyes heavy from slumber as I swing the door open to let her in amidst a stifled yawn. "You've only been here two days and it's already a mess." Nat sighs, looking around as I kick the door shut and dive back to the bed because I felt like my body would melt into the floor if I stayed on my feet any longer. "Sorry, mom." I mumble against the mattress, hearing the patter of her footsteps pace along with the sound of ruckus—the sound of her trying to clean. "I can do it myself." I groan, li ing my head enough for my voice to hit her ears with clarity. "Clearly, you can't." She states sternly, ignoring my remark as she tosses my discarded clothes into the basket at the corner of the "Why are you here, Nat?" I finally flip over, willing myself to sit up as Natasha paces restlessly with my clutter in her hands. "I'm worried about you. You don't eat, you don't talk, you barely even look me in the eyes and—seriously? Pills?" She snaps to look at me, swi ly grabbing the orange bottle from the bedside table as I bury my face in my hands out of frustration. "I don't know what you want from me." I sigh, turning away as the rattle of the pills echo through the space. I feel a dip beside me, Natasha's shoulders brushing against mine as she sighs as well. "Talk to me. I'm still here for you." She pleads gently, I can feel her ground— afraid that if I look at her, i'd feel it all again. "I'm fine, Nat. I'm just tired— worried about Lara." I excuse. Technically, I wasn't completely lying. I was far from fine and closer to a burning mess but I was actually worried — amongst other things. Amongst a million di erent things driving me insane. There was a part of me that still wanted to melt into her, to confide in her the way I did before, but she was part of what hurt. She was part of what haunted me and looking at her, even hearing her voice was tearing me apart. Tugging at me in every direction that I felt like I was being torn into pieces down every turn. "I want to be here for you, because it's not going to get easier anytime soon. There's... a memorial in three, for everyone that died in London." She reveals, her words almost instantly churning my gut as I snap to look at her. "Are you seriously insinuating that I go?" It comes out rapidly, sharply, taking Natasha by surprise as she looked back at me in reluctance. "Nobody blames you, if you show up then maybe you'd see that." She replies so ly, eyes swimming in despair as I chuckle bitterly. "I blame me, Nat. I blame me Every single person— every single family there is grieving because of me.If I had gotten there in time, If I did something di erent then it wouldn't have even happened!" I exclaim, shooting up to my feet as I look back at her in horror. "That's not fair, Lexa. It wasn't on you, there was no way you could have known—" "But I should have! I should have! She's my sister She did all of that because of me You almost died, Natasha!" I scream, my words tearing through my throat with agonizing fire that ached to my core. "But I didn't! We didn't!" She retaliates, slowly losing her composure. "But you almost did. How could I ever forgive myself if you did? If Maria or James did? If Steve did? If Wandadid? Tell me what i'd tell the world. How i'd ever explain that everyone's best shot at safety was burned to ash all over a mess that I started." I fire back, tears brimming my eyes as my hands shook by my side. "Tell me what i'd tell myself, Nat. If lost any of you— how could I ever live with myself? Do you know how that felt for me? Seeing all of those bodies, seeing all of you within the flames and chains— all of you in pain. It plays in my head, over and fucking over!" My voice trembled the walls, shaking the room as Natasha sunk into silence at my agony. "You were the only one in almost a decade that ever took a chance on me before I could even prove myself. It was you and I almost lost you." I say shakily, my tone dropping into somewhat of a pained whisper as my heart shatters in my chest. a "I may not have put you in that chair, I may not have chained you up but it might as well be me since I caused it and I can't — I can't look at you, at any of you without remembering that." I finish, not even noticing the tears already streaming down my face as Natasha's eyes drop to her lap, wiring shut in a wince as I wipe at my tears incessantly. "Lexa..." Natasha trails o soly, speechless and somber in her spot as I shake my head almost desperately. "Please just go. Please I— I can't do this right now." I beg, to which Natasha silently nods as she rises to her feet. "Me walking out that door— is not me giving up. I just need you to know that." She says almost carefully, like the slightest noise could shatter me into a million pieces and honestly, maybe it could. "I know." So she goes and I cry, I cry again until no tears come out but my chest was constricting just the same. I cry until my head throbs and my throat swells and every breath feels like sandpaper down my throat because it was the only thing I could do. It was the only thing I had le. I could never undo what happened, give back the lives lost including my own so I laid there until my eyes were swollen shut and my nails were digging so deep into my palms it would draw blood. Everything in that room was a reminder— everything in that entire building was torturous. No matter how far I run, the walls still look like they're bleeding and the air still tastes like ash on my tongue and I still can't breathe. I still can't breathe. Every bone in my body was aching to break—but I was beyond trashing rooms like a sullen child. So I walked out— I walked out and somehow found my way to the training rooms that Steve used to lead me to and thankfully it was empty. It was quiet, but not better. So without even bothering to wrap my hands I stood by the bag, hanging from the ceiling in chains that make up my nightmares and I punch. I keep punching until my skin was bright red and my body was covered in sweat, I punch until the chains break o and it hits the ground and even then I keep punching. My eyes were closed and my breath was still and everything inside me felt frozen and scorched all at once and I couldn't quite understand how exactly that could be. I grab one of the weights from the racks, the biggest, heaviest I could find and tossed it over the bag that was laid onto the floor. Without another thought, I collide my fist against the metal over and over. I can feel it beneath my skin, every crack, every break, every moment it fuses back together like a loop existing solely to mock me. My fingers were bent, twisted at all angles and mangled while the blinding pain shoots up my arm but it doesn't compare—no. I thought it would. I thought it could silence the catastrophe in my chest, but it doesn't. It never does. "Lexa— Lexa what the hell!" A voice snaps me out of my destructive trance, feeling an arm wrap around my shoulders to try and pry me away from the bag. Purely out of instinct, I grab onto whoever was behind me and bend to flip them over to the ground, the thudding sound of a body hitting the mat echoing through the room as I come face to face with Jess, eyes shut in pain as her blonde hair flows against the blue, padded mats. Her mouth hangs agape, almost in pain but no sound comes out as I finally take a breath and fall to my knees by her side. "Fuck— i'm so sorry. Jess? Jess open your eyes. I'm so sorry." I ramble in a panic, cupping her face in my hands as she struggles to arch her presumably aching back o of the ground. "Yeah— yeah that was on me. Shouldn't have snuck up on you." She finally croaks out, lids li ing to reveal blue eyes through her thick rimmed glasses as a wave of relief washes over me and I fall back to sit on the ground. "Holy shit. I'm sorry." I breathe as Jess carefully props herself up to sit, taking deep breaths as she adjusts her neck. "No it's fine. I panicked when I saw... your hand. Which is okay now, great." Her eyes draw to my hands, nodding to herself like she was trying to make sense of things as I raise a brow. "Didn't they tell you? I'm kind of... enhanced." It comes out awkwardly, because I never actually had to address it in such a... casual environment. Everyone i've ever encountered has somehow always knew. "No—I know. You and Lara, yeah I know. I just forget, takes a while to get used to it. I see your mangled hand and it just slips my mind that you can magically heal yourself." She rambles, gathering the scattered papers on the ground by her side. "They worked, by the way." I hum, moving to help her retrieve the mess of files peppered upon the mat. "The pills?" She asks, almost in awe as I nod before helping her to her feet. "Yeah. I was knocked out for a good few hours or so. Most i've gotten in weeks so... thank you." I shrug, watching as she adjusts her coat and dusts herself o. "I'm glad to know it helped." She hums lightly, crimson red lips tilted into a smile as I clear my throat. "How... is she? Lara." I stammer so ly, the reluctance evident on my tongue as Jess' face falters. She tightens her grasp on the papers, stepping around me without another word right before stopping by the door. "Walk with me?" She asks, and I comply. "To be frank, it's not good. No progress—nothing. She refuses any and all kinds of treatment. The day she got here, up until your visit she was extremely hostile but a er her outburst yesterday she's just... silent. Stoic. She hasn't uttered a word since your encounter." Jess divulges in a so sigh as we ascend up the stairs, her eyes trailing on me as we walked. "You think... she'd talk to me? If I went down there again, would it be a good idea?" I think aloud, looking to Jess as she so ly shakes her head. "I think it's too soon. The last time you spoke, almost half of the glass was covered in her blood. It was like she was trying to break through — like she couldn't even feel the pain while trying to get to you. I'm afraid that another encounter so close together may cause an even more severe outcome." She explains with as much empathy and apology as she could muster as my heart sinks at the memory of Lara and I's conversation. "I'm sorry, Lexa." Jess o ers sadly, stopping in her tracks and causing me to do the same. "No—no, you're right. I'll make it worse if I go now." I wave her o, trying to keep a cordial face even when everything inside me was shattering under the weight of the guilt that still lived in my chest. "Have you had lunch?" She changes the topic, but her ocean blue eyes were still screaming with apologetic pity. "No." I mumble. "You owe me a conversation." She musters up a smile, trying her best to lighten the quickly sinking mood as I o er her a hesitant nod. ook, i'm not going to pretend I could begin to understand wh going on but.. I guess I just wanted to say that i'm glad you're agreeing to talk." Jess says, glancing over at me as we continue down the corridor. "I mean usually, when people show up at my door with a handful of pills it costs me at least a hundred. Conversation is free." I hum, willing a small smile onto my lips as Jess chuckles lightly. "Okay no— you're making me sound like some shady, back alley drug dealer. I'm a respected doctor." She corrects, the sound of her heels clicking bouncing o the walls of the empty halls. "And those were also respected... drug dealers." I counter as Jess' laughter fills the air. "Don't even put me in the same orbit as—" Jess cuts o, eyes kept ahead as she slowly sinks into silence. I follow her line of sight, coming face to face with cool green eyes that instantly made my heart still. Wanda had just turned the corner, stopped in her tracks wearing a shirt and some sweats that I remember she used to work out in. Her autumn hair balled up into a bun, loose strands framing her stoic face as her eyes trail between Jess and I.

Then she keeps walking. Just like that, she takes a step a er the other and passes us like we were never there to begin with. With a heavy sigh and thickening air, I continue down the corridor as I hear Wanda's footsteps fade down to the training room and my stomach churns in agony that I fight to keep from spilling through my fingertips. The rest of the way to the dining area was treaded in silence, probably because Jess was too afraid to ask why exactly she found Wanda in my room, me in tears and now she's looking at me like I was nothing but thin air. We step out of the elevator, my hands in my pockets as we enter the area that looked more like a cafeteria than anything else, while I try to make sense of the rapidly su ocating feeling engulfing me. "You can go take a seat, i'll grab the food. Anything you want in particular?" Jess finally speaks up, expectant eyes looking my way as I gently shake my head. "No. I'm fine with anything." I hum, watching as she takes in my words and walks away. I find a table near the window, slipping into the chair as I keep my eyes out through the glass. The sky was really blue, barely any clouds. If I look hard enough, I could pretend I was actually out there. Out under the sun, feeling the wind against my skin, looking up into the sky without all the weight that keeps trying to drag me to the

center of the earth. I could pretend like the girl who held my heart didn't just look through me—I could pretend like it didn't hurt. Like my heart wasn't dragged through the wringer, like I could still pull her in and hold her close without feeling like I was on fire. Like she wasn't the best thing I had found since I took my first breath of existence. It's ridiculous, how one complicated thing twists everything else like some sort of sick domino e ect I couldn't cut o . What happened in London tainted everything I ever knew, everything I ever loved like it was paint I couldn't wash away. Smeared onto the walls, the ceiling, every surface and no matter how much I scrub and try to clean it o it only deepens. "Tuna melt and some chocolate milk." Jess says, setting the items down in front of me as I stare at the little brown box situated before a "I get that you think this is some sort of therapy session—but i'm twenty two. Not twelve." I raise a brow, going to unwrap the foil from the sandwich as Jess slips into the seat adjacent to mine. "It was all they had!" She bites back a smile, relaxing into her chair as she sets her papers down on the space next to her food. "Sure, doc." I hum, taking a bite of the first proper meal i've had in So far, i've been surviving o of apples and water— and even then I still feel sick to my stomach. I felt like throwing up, like my body was actively rejecting anything good, anything that would keep me alive. The only reason I agreed to this was because I felt like my stomach was gonna burn through if I didn't eat anything solid so I had to tough it out because the last thing I needed was to be more of a burden than I already am. "So... Wanda Maximo ." Jess hums, taking a bite of her sandwich as her eyes stay on me almost suggestively. "What?" I nearly choke on air, making an awkward move to tend to my food and hope that my face didn't literally give everything away. "I'm not judging or anything. It's just... interesting. Fury has called me in a few times before at the beginning of the year and I'd see her around but... almost always with the—Vision? I guess I assumed wrong." She says amidst a shrug as I keep my eyes on my food, taking a bite that felt like rocks going down my throat. "No, you're right. He's made of the same— shit that she got her powers from so they're like... soulmates or something." I reply lowly, refusing to look back at her even when the words that fall from my lips leave a bitter taste. But it wasn't like I was lying. Seeing them together is almost electric, like they're in each other's heads. He knows what she needs before she even needs it and vice versa. Sometimes all it takes is one look, the moment she's hurt he'd drop the world to rush to her side. It almost makes me feel guilty about the jealousy that bubbles within me because he loves her with the same purity I wished to have when I was a kid gawking at love through a screen in my living room couch. "You know... sometimes, what's meant for you is more than just one thing." Jess casually hums in a failing attempt at subtlety as I finally look up at her. "What are you trying to say?" I question. "I'm just thinking out loud. Just... putting that thought out there." She smiles innocently, taking a sip of her drink as my brows twitch into a furrow. "Nothing is going on between Wanda and I." I state almost angrily, keeping my eyes on her as she feigns surprise—rather obviously too. "I never said there was." She loosely defends. "You're looking at me weird." "No i'm not." "Yes you are." "You're being defensive over nothing— so you say! She says, very body tensing as I set my sandwich down. "You're doing a thing!" I point out in a small exclamation, watching as Jess only shrugs like she had no idea what I was talking about. "I'm not doing a thing" She mocks. "Yes you are. You're like— saying something but your expression is suggesting something else. You're doing a thing" I argue in irritation, but she's firm on denial. It almost looked amusing to her, to see me in so much frustration. "Okay you're being so defensive, you're the one doing a thing." She counters, a breathy chuckle escaping from her lips as she takes a bite from her food, waving me o as I stared back at her—still very much annoyed. "I'm not. I'm just saying— there's nothing going on with me and Wanda Maximo ." I clarify uncomfortably, begrudgingly tending back to my lunch with a small scowl plastered on my lips. I wasn't wrong. There really was nothing between Wanda and I, at least not anymore. Whatever chance that existed flew down the drain the night I watched her walk away. I keep trying to tell myself I did the right thing, but god, does the right thing always feel so torturous? Now I had to sit there with my heart in my throat telling Jess nothing was going on like the past few weeks hadn't happened because as of right now, it might as well be non-existent. "You're the one who led us back to that topic, twice." She points out, adjusting the glasses perched upon her nose. "Because you did a thing." I mumble amidst a mouth full of food, rolling my eyes as she buries her head in her hands defeatedly. "Oh my god." She groans against her palms. "What did you want to ask me, anyway?" I mumble, looking up at her as I take a bite out of the sandwich that admittedly, tasted like cardboard smothered in cheese but it was better than nothing. "As much as you can tell me about your life with Lara. Y'know before everything. All the information I have are from files and documents but nothing that's actually substantial." She says with a defeated breath. "You want to know the kind of person she was?" I raise a brow, trying to prepare myself to wade through piles of memories that sting like a thousand cuts as Jess nods. "As much as you can tell me." She confirms. I didn't really know where to start. All of my memories of Lara in the past was almost tucked away in a box, riddled in golden chains that used to mean my whole world. It was like peeling away at the layers of a universe that knew no end. How could I ever, through my own words, encompass the life we used to have. It was never perfect, but we had each other. We had our own little world, a world full of color and paintings of flowers on a warm a ernoon day. A life full of conversations on the kitchen counter and inside jokes that hurt more than they heal, a life of dependence, trust, love. A life that still had love. "She was... artistic. She loved to draw, paint, sketch— anything that involved colors and paper, she'd love it. She adored boxed pasta, the mac and cheese with the powder and everything. I hated it, thought it tasted like garbage but she loved it because it was bright and 'tasted like the sun.' or whatever that meant." I begin, my eyes torn away from Jess and glued to my food, picking away at the corners of the foil as the words spilled from my lips. "She... never liked TV. I used to try and put on cartoons when she was younger, but she never gravitated to it. She liked it when I read to her. She liked to make friends—she loved to ask questions. She was really inquisitive, curious, sometimes to an annoying extent." I continue almost robotically, teetering on ice that was sinking into the depths of my gut as I tried to speak without feeling the entirety of the words. "She was the more optimistic one between us. As hard as that is to believe now— she was. She always found the good in the worst of times and when i'd be spiraling and freaking out, she'd be the one believing things would turn out okay. I mean yeah, she had doubts, she had her fears but she was better than me." I chuckle so ly at the thought, her little smile, her quaint voice spilling with reassurance even at the most di icult moments. It was so bittersweet to think about, because I couldn't grasp that memory without the burden of "She was smart. She was funny and... she was kind. I know it sounds like it's worlds away but she was the kindest little girl." I breathe shakily, my fingers rolling a piece of foil to try and find some stable ground amidst the heavy conversation. "There was this one time she dragged me out to a park back when we had just moved to Hungary, both of us didn't speak the language at all-could not understand a single thing and there was this little boy, sitting by the swings with his head tucked into his hands. He was sobbing—like full on crying and nobody was even minding him." I share, the memory flashing vividly in my mind as I spoke. "Lara didn't hesitate to go up to him. She had no idea what he was saying, why he was upset but she sat with him. She even gave him a page from her sketch pad and they sat and drew together for hours until he cheered up. I hated it, it was hot and I was bored and sweating but she refused to leave until he had a smile on his face so I sat there and waited." A small smile crawls onto my lips, the looming ghost of longing still slowly enveloping every inch of me as I feel Jess' "She was good. She was so good, selfless, full of love even when we were growing up in a home that lacked a lot of it she still bloomed. I could never do what she did, I noticed everything and let it break my heart but she was—like a flower growing in dead soil. It was like it didn't even matter." I finally meet Jess' eyes, her entire body stilled like stone as she listened to me speak. "Then I le . Things got complicated with my father and his work with HYDRA so I o ered myself up on a silver platter. I gave myself so they could live—I was young and I thought that I could somehow preserve her goodness by throwing myself into the dark. I tried to soak it up, all the pain and evil and su ering because in the back of my mind, I thought it meant there would be nothing le for her." I smile sadly, a sigh falling from my lips. "But I was wrong, obviously" I add, shaking my head as I take another bite. "You don't... have to do this all in one go. I'm here indefinitely, at least until they've decided what to do with Lara concerning the legal aspect." Jess speaks up, her words floating through the air with gentle caution. "It's fine." I dismiss halfheartedly "No. This is topic is triggering, understandably. It's a lot to unload and it can be really destructive if we go about it recklessly. We're going to pace our conversations, okay?" She shi s in her seat, elbows rested upon the table as her fingers intertwine. She looks really professional, like she's gone and flipped a switch. "Pace it?" I question. "Yeah. We can talk about it a little bit everyday, just until you think you're nearing your limit and we can pick up another time." She

me.

days.

explains lightly, adjusting her glasses as she picks up on my "It doesn't have to be everyday, by the way. Just- whenever you feel okay enough to. You also have to know where you draw the line. Si ing through memories that are tied to traumatic events can cause damage if it isn't done correctly and gradually. It can be really painful." She explains further, talking with so much gentleness without a hint of malice or irritation at my inability to completely "How do I know my limit?" I question a er a few moments of "You'll feel it. Think of it like... pouring water." She hums, perking up at the metaphor as she speaks. "You're the glass, the water is your emotions and talking is the hand the hand that pours. If you feel your emotions—the water, nearing the rim of the glass then we stop pouring." She explains further. "It can manifest in many ways like di iculty breathing, butterflies in your stomach, restless behavior or uneasiness and it's not only limited to that. So when we're talking and you feel your emotions about to pour over the edge, we can stop. I won't pry further, I won't judge you. We'll stop immediately." She says, head nodding lightly along to her words as my brain comprehends her examples. The feeling was so foreign, what she was o ering was something I wasn't entirely used to. It felt like I had... a choice. She worded it like the entire thing depended solely on my well-being, without a ghost of resentment or force. It almost struck me as suspicious, her tenderness and sensitivity but maybe that's only because nobody else has o ered me something so... free. "What's... the catch?" I question with hesitance, my words veering, dragging in what resembles confusion as Jess only shakes her head. "No catch. Well— if we're thinking of it literally, I get to be better at my job and you get someone to confide in. So I guess we're mutually benifitting." She shrugs, tending back to her food with nonchalance while I spiral in place, thinking about all she had laid out for me in the "So, is it a deal?" She reaches over the table, her waiting hand outstretched before me as I glance back up at her with reluctance. "Deal." I nod, slipping my hand into hers as she gives it a quick shake. "Great. We can continue tomorrow, right now all I want to ask is if your sandwich is as shitty as mine." She veers, face contorting into a slight cringe as an inadvertent laugh falls from my lips. "It is. Tastes like cardboard." I chuckle, lightly pushing the sandwich a few inches away from me as she does the same. "It does, doesn't it?" She agrees instantly, holding the food up to her face as she inspects it with disgust. "You'd think a place that looks like this would have better food." She mumbles, setting the sandwich down with a small sigh. "They do have good co ee, though." I hum. "Really? I've honestly lost all faith a er this. I ate here when I arrived yesterday and I thought maybe I just got the worst thing on the menu but nope. It's all bad." She converses with such nonchalance that it It was new, somewhat astounding how she can switch from this doctor who is throwing metaphors at me and being incredibly gentle to just another girl complaining about a shitty sandwich like I hadn't just laid a good bit of my background for her to pick apart. She was going on about a deli in Queens, something about it having one of the best sandiwches she'd had while I sit there and listen, a small smile on my lips because it was... refreshing. a Talking to Jess, watching how she sheds the heaviness with such ease was refreshing. It was nice to speak to someone, to even merely look at someone and not instantly feel my chest cave in. So we sat there until she was called to the labs, parting ways by the elevator as I walked back to my room thinking about all that had transpired in just half a day wondering if this was another dead end, or something that could actually be good. But I was too tired to hope, so I let the tide roll in without a fight, thinking that if I get dragged under—it I was drowning anyway. Continue reading next part □

reluctance.

comprehend her o er.

span of ten minutes.

almost amazes me.

wouldn't even matter.

hesitation.