29 "I'm not wearing that." Wanda shakes her head, backing away until her back hits the drawers. "Yes you are." I smirk, mischief shining in my eyes as I approach holding the item she dreaded in my hands. "Sam's going to make fun of me!" She whines, bolting to the wall in an attempt to keep the distance between us as I stifle a laugh at her childlike nature. "Sam makes fun of everybody!" I reason, hooking my arms around her waist as she tries to run past me and practically sending us tumbling down to the bed just a few steps behind me. With Wanda firm in my grip, I crawl on top of her. My knees were pressed against the mattress, pressed right by her hips to lock her in place as I successfully slip the Santa hat onto her head. The tip was glowing, flashing di erent colors as I pin her hands down by her wrists to prevent her from yanking the hat o . "I look so stupid." She argues as I pepper her face with kisses, feeling the way she was fighting o a smile as I give her lips extra attention. "You look adorable." I chuckle, pressing a few more before letting up on her wrists and looking down at her. She did look adorable, so adorable my heart could melt at the sight. She had the whole thing going on, the red sweater, skin tight jeans and now the matching Santa hat that sat flush atop her head. She even had a scowl of disapproval, but it didn't matter to me. It was Christmas Eve, my first one in nearly a decade that wasn't spent in some random country, cooped up in a hotel room and sweeping whatever bars I could find just to drown out the feeling of being alone. For the first time in a long time, I wasn'talone. I was somewhere that felt warm, that felt alive. I had people to buy presents for, and to receive them from. I had a girl I adore, laying right under me looking so beautiful i'm convinced no gi in the world could ever best her and I had Lara. We weren't completely alright—but for the first time in a long time I wasn't staring up at the night sky wondering if she was alright. Wondering if she got her gi s, if she was sitting under a tree and tearing them open or eating cookies and milk— or if she missed me. For the first time in a long time, she was right here, with me. And i'm happy. For one night, for one day I was completely, unwaveringly happy. It was like everything that happened before couldn't penetrate the bubble I had around me, like for a moment the way the world burned was le at the door. The fire couldn't catch me, not here, not with Wanda, not when i'm happy. "I'll be wearing the same thing. It'll be cute." I crawl o Wanda, plopping down next to her on the bed as I slip on my own hat, clicking the little button to ignite the little flashing lights. "It'll be cute because you are, I only look dumb." Wanda flips over to her side, resting a gentle hand on my stomach as I turn to look at her. She makes me so breathless, sometimes I felt like a kid with a big fat crush on the pretty girl down the street. "I can hear you again." She smiles, a subtle blush creeping onto her cheeks as I tug at her sweater, pulling her in for a kiss that intoxicates me more than any drink I knew i'd be having that night. "Do we have to go?" She mumbles against my lips, her smile shaping against my own as I trail my fingers up and down her back. "As much as I'd love to do this..." I press my lips to hers once more, pulling away just enough to pepper kisses from her mouth to her neck, slowing right at her jawline enough to feel her breath hitch. "And you." I whisper, promptly stilling my movements and pulling far enough to chuckle at the pout on her lips. "I'm pretty sure Nat's going to drag us both by our neck if we don't head up there now." I smile, taking in the way she looks back at me with so much warmth amidst the snow blanketing the compound outside. "Yeah, you're right." She chuckles so ly, placing a gentle kiss on my cheek before crawling o the bed and pulling me up with her. I adjust the hat upon her head, rolling my eyes at the little pout she gives as I intertwine our fingers. "Ready?" I ask, raising my brows as she nods. "Always." We make our way to the elevators, the moment the doors open at the floor we could already hear the music, the chatter and the laughter from inside. With beaming smiles on both of our faces, we step inside. Wanda and I have spent most of our days cooped up in my room, only going out for training and food once in a while so this would probably be the first time the team would be seeing us... together Though neither of us have really talked about labels, it didn't really feel critical to. We were satisfied, more than satisfied just being with one another that something as measly as a name didn't come o as significant. I wasn't going anywhere and she made it incessantly clear she wasn't either, so there we were. Standing by the end of the hall, hand in hand as Sam, who was the first one to spot us, erupts into a fit of cheers. All eyes turn to us, Natasha, Steve, James, and even Vision raised a glass as we approach. It totally slipped my mind, the whole thing with Vision. I hadn't seen him in a bit, and our last conversation didn't exactly unfold with the best outcome. I hadn't asked Wanda yet, if she was able to speak to him or if he said anything about this whole thing and even if I was happy, I wasn't going to be the asshole that rubs it in his face. All of them were plastered on the seats by the fireplace, a moderately sized Christmas tree propped up in the corner with twinkling blue lights draped elegantly around it. Just by how neat it is, I could already tell Natasha had set it up along with all the gi s that sat under it. I took the liberty of placing our own, setting it snug amongst the other wrapped boxes before heading back by Wanda's side. "They live!" Sam exclaims happily, laughing along with the rest as I take the empty spot on the couch between Steve and Wanda. "I feel like I haven't seen you in months!" Sam chuckles, taking a big gulp of his beer as I stifle a laugh. "She's been busy." James notes in amusement, fuelling the teasing laughter that was peppering the air. " Verybusy, by the looks of it." Natasha chimes in, sending me a knowing look from her seat as I pray for the floor to open up and eat me alive. It was better than all the embarrassment. "And by the sound of it." James, much to my surprise, adds. I snap to him, eyes wide as he shakes his head amidst a smile. "I pass by your room sometimes." James shrugs, explaining everythingwithout saying more as the warmth beneath my cheeks worsen. "I'm going to die." I mumble, sinking back into my seat as Wanda only laughs along at their suggestive comments. "Okay— okay! On a more serious note, how are you? I heard about what happened." Sam waves his hands, motioning for everyone to calm as eyes stick to me once more. I could feel Wanda tense up right next to me, her hand almost instinctively placing itself upon my knee as I hum in thought. "I'm good as new, Sam. You don't have to worry about me yet." I smile, thankful for his concern as he promptly rises to his feet. "Good as new, see? Steve's been bugging me not to drown you in drinks because he's worried but Ineed a drinking buddy." He walks o before Steve could even really protest, practically beelining for the "You're worried?" I look to Steve, who hu s in defeat as he turns to me. "I just don't want you to overexert yourself." He explains calmly, the guilt still prominent in his eyes and for a moment, my heart falters. I knew what it was like to drown in the guilt of seeing somebody you care about get hurt, I just had never been on the other side of the situation. "I'm perfectly fine, I promise." I lower my voice into somewhat of a whisper, giving Steve a reassuring pat on the back right as Sam comes back holding a few beers that he happily hands out. "Okay, we need to do a toast and since Lexa is the new kid on the block—you've got the honors. Take it away." He plops down into his seat, wiggling his brows as panic sets in. I look to Wanda, puzzled and nervous as she gives me a supportive smile, nodding for me to go on as I try to swallow the huge lump forming in my throat. She squeezes my knee lightly as I rack my brain on what to say, popping the cap o of my bottle with ease as I clear my throat. "Do I stand or?" I awkwardly question no nobody in particular feeling the pressure under their amused gazes peering upon me. "You can do whatever you want." Steve chuckles from my side, giving me a small reassuring nudge as I take a deep breath. I felt like I was about to do some sort of presentation with the way my heart was thumping against my chest. "Okay so... I really don't know how this goes. I'll try my best not to make it awkward." I laugh nervously, shi ing in my seat as I grip my bottle for some moral support. I was pretty sure I was on the verge of shattering it in my hand. "This is... the first Christmas in almost nine years that i'm not spending alone. Usually, i'm in some shitty hotel or facility, waiting for time to pass so I guess that's why tonight is pretty special." I try to keep my voice steady, to not stumble over my own words as I spoke. "A few days ago was also the first time I went gi shopping. I guess what i'm trying to say is a lot of firsts happened... with you guys. I know i've only known all of you for a few months and it also wasn't the smoothest ride but... this is the closest i've ever felt to having a real family." I clear my throat, hoping my restraint won't fail me and shake my voice— even when my heart was begging to bleed from my tongue. "A few months ago I put a gun to my mouth. A few months ago, I stood in a sea of bodies— of blood that Idrew. I saw my reflection on the glass and I saw... no future, no life, no meaning. I was just a monster and I was too defeated to deny it to myself. In that same moment, Natasha stood there and... convinced me to come here." I begin, the words flowing freely, purely fuelled by emotion as the silence thickens and their eyes stay unwaveringly on me. "Natasha o ered me a chance to get my sister back and at the time— I didn't realize there was more to it. She didn't just o er me a way to Lara, she o ered me a life, a life with possibility and love and happiness. She o ered me a family, a place to belong. She o ered me a home." I look to Natasha as I spoke, frozen in her seat with her eyes locked on me and I could swear they were glimmering with tears. She'd never admit it, though. "I was ready to accept that I was doomed to live in the dark. That everything I touch, would rot and die and fall apart and every single one of you showed me that there was more to me. Just letting me be here, accepting me and fighting for me— is a dream I could have never deserved and yet it was given." I chuckle sadly, using all of my strength to fight the tears daring to fall from my eyes because I was not about to turn this into a soppy, cry fest— even when I could feel Wanda slip her hand into mine. "So I just want to say thank you. Thank you for letting me feel alive, for taking me in, for the patience and the kindness—thank you for giving me a chance. There was always someone in this room who found a reason to believe in me even when I was begging to surrender and for that, i'll always be grateful." I say with utmost seriousness, my heart laid out for everyone to see as I raise my bottle with a small smile. "Merry Christmas everyone." I conclude and a sea of smiles plaster on their faces, with Natasha hunched over and incessantly wiping at her eyes. "Widow's crying?" Sam points out, in playful awe as Natasha li sher head to send him a glare. Her eyes were a subtle red, tear streaks running down her cheeks as her eyes find mine. "Thank you." I mouth to her, a sad smile on my lips as tears well up in my eyes as well. "Not wrong about you. She mouths back amidst the overlapping conversation of the rest, taking me back to the night in the alley right a er Tony's party. a The dinner unfolds the same, with banter and a whole lot of drinks that Sam made sure to keep flowing. Natasha had spent the day running around New York, picking up takeout and making some dishes herself that were far more impressive than I had expected which is also why I approached her privately for a little plan I had stirring. Steve couldn't get through the night without spewing out another speech, James and Sam were locked in constant back and forth while Wanda and I sat happily listening, laughing at their boisterous nature. Vision was most silent, nodding along and smiling, talking when spoken to and helping out with grabbing the drinks. I had made a mental note to speak to him sometime in the night, just hoping he was having a good time too despite the heaviness I could clearly see him bearing. When it was time for the gi s, everyone had relocated back to the couches by the fireplace, with Natasha making sure everything was organized enough despite all of us having a he y amount of alcohol in our system. Sam went first, revealing he had picked James, who opened his present of socks. He was tipsy enough to find it hilarious, even giving Sam a little hug before revealing that he had chosen Steve. He hands Steve his present, Steve beaming like a little boy as he opens the little box to find a silver watch with dark, leather straps. As joyous as Steve looked, I could tell he was nervous because then It meant his turn was up, and he had been overthinking his gi to Natasha ever since we arrived. "I really didn't know what to get, but I saw these and I thought of you." Steve says, approaching Natasha with his neatly wrapped gi s in his hands. Natasha, who looks delightfully surprised, takes the presents with a smile and wastes no time in unwrapping them to find the kits Steve had picked out from the mall. "This is perfect. Oh my god. Thank you." Natasha melts, setting the items aside and pulling Steve into a tight hug that earns little coos from everyone around. Steve returns to his place by my side, sending me a victorious smile as his eyes glimmer with pride. "Told you she'd love it." I nudge, and he mouths me a quick 'thank you before Natasha continues with her turn. She reveals her pick of Vision, handing him his present as he accepts it with a cordial smile. He systematically undoes the wrapping, doing it with grace and caution to reveal aviator sunglasses sitting upon sleek, crimson silk. The rims were sparkling gold, lenses tinted black as Vision's smile widens. He li s the item up to his face, almost like he's studying it before putting it on with a smile. "How do I look?" He asks, promptly shi ing before my eyes as he turns into looking like a normal man. His red skin and patches of metal, gone and replaced by short blonde hair and lively, light complexion all while I nearly choke on my drink. "Oh, my man! You're a lady killer. Terminator over here gonna be terminating the ladies." Sam cheers sloppily, his booming laugh mixing in with everyone elses as I stare with my mouth agape. Was that a casual thing because absolutely none of them seemed fazed. a "He does that sometimes, usually when he goes out. He doesn't like people staring." Wanda explains, being the only one to note my surprise. "So it's... it's normal?" I ask, still in evident awe as she nods with a small smile. "So Vis, who'd you get?" Natasha asks, all of us watching as Vision carefully places his sunglasses back into it's case and shi s back into his usual, robot looking self before getting up and heading to the tree. He does it all without speaking a word, picking up a rectangular box that was merely a little bigger than my hand as he turns around and heads right... to me. My heart nearly stops—the room goes silent, and Wanda's eyes widen along with my own as he comes to a halt right before me. He holds out the neatly wrapped present, concealed under paper that was peppered with little reindeers as I take it with reluctance. Vision stands patiently, watching as I tear the wrapping to reveal a book. The Complete Stories and Poems by Edgar Allan Poe. "Wanda has mentioned once before, in passing, that you were a fan of poetry. Specifically, Oscar Wilde. I did quite a bit of research and I thought you'd appreciate broadening your... collection. I hope this would su ice." He says, a small smile on his lips as my eyes trace over the book in my hands. It was a hard copy, deep blue background with a pitch black bird sitting right in the middle, just below the white lettered title. "Could I speak to you for a minute?" I ask, feeling everyone's eyes firm on the scene unfolding between Vision and I as I rise to my feet. He looks visibly confused, but grants me my request as we excuse ourselves to the dining area a few feet away. "We won't be long, continue without us." I wave o, mainly to Natasha as Vision and I come to a stop by the fridge. "Have I done something wrong? Did you not like the present?" He asks, genuine worry in his tone as I shake my head. I set the book down carefully by the counter, taking a breath as I turn to look at him once again. "I didn't ask to speak to you because i'm upset." I begin, but my words seem to cause him no help as he only looks even more confused. "I asked you here to apologize." I finally say, the heaviness in my chest shaking as he tilts his head slightly, eyes darting away almost as if he was trying to understand what I meant. "Apologize?" He reiterates slowly, like he was trying to make sure he understood correctly as I o er him a small nod. "For the way i've spoken to you and for... Wanda. I know you love her and I know you care, I know I put you through hell with everything too and I want to tell you that i'm sorry." I say in one breath, shaky and uncertain as he looks back at me silently. "Between us, I think you know you were the better choice. I can't deny that but I do love her, and I want you to know i'm doing everything I can to be good for her." I say to him, the most vocally honest I had ever been about our situation. If it were up to me, if my emotions were something I could turn o - ifthe story was something I could change I would have never interfered. I knew the way he loves Wanda, the way he sees her, cares for her, the way he'd do anything for her. In the back of my mind, the self sabotaging, resentful part of me did wish she never came to my window, that she stayed hating me, that she never remembered because with Vision, she would have gone down the path meant for her. A path with less complication, less pain, could give her that. I knew he could. But i'm only human, and my heart stops when she smiles and melts when she touches me. My bones ache when she's far, and the stars align when she holds me and it wasn't something I could ignore— or walk away from. It wasn't something I wanted to walk away from. "I never understood thoroughly, what love is because it was never what I was made for. I tried to... read about it, to douse myself in literature and media to help me understand but I could never quite grasp it but I do know that love cannot truly exist without happiness. I do know that without it—love is merely a shell." He explains slowly, sounding like he's trying to articulate himself as best he can for the both of us. "I also know that I feel something great for Wanda, something beyond my comprehension but she is most happy with you. She is most... herself, before all the madness that she has had to endure in this life. She looks at peace just being by your side and that... that entails no apology. Though I appreciate the thought, you've never owed me an apology. I'm happy that she is, and that you are." He says, his voice a soothing tether to my ears as my heart swells in my chest. Without another thought, and probably because I was three glasses of Bourbon and five bottles of beer in, I pull him into an embrace that takes him by surprise. It takes him a moment to grasp what i'm doing, but eventually he does relax into it and wraps his arms around me. I can feel him being gentle, like it was an act he had never seen before and he was trying not to crush me in his grip. With a beaming smile and a light heart, I pull away to see a curious smile on his lips. "You've never been hugged before, have you?" I deduce, watching as he shakes his head slightly. "Well, there's a first for everything. Come on." I swipe the book from the counter, leading him back to the rest who all wasted no time in eyeing us curiously. "Vision is still in one piece so I assume it was a good talk." Sam jokingly notes as I take my seat back between Steve and Wanda, who looks to me instantly with question. "It was good." I smile at her, relief filling her features as Natasha chimes in. "Lexa, you're the last one." She says to me, and I take it as my cue to get up and retrieve the present from under the tree. Amidst a sea of cheers and little whistles, mostly from Sam, I head over to Wanda with a pestering blush and a pounding heart as I hand her the little box that I wrapped with Lara's help. "Really? For me?" She teases, laughter falling from her lips as I roll my eyes. "Oh you're horrible at acting surprised. Just open it." I hu, watching as she takes it from my grasp before I sit back down by her side. Wanda carefully tears the wrapping, her fingers going as gentle as she did when she held the book in Natasha's apartment. She li s the lid slowly, revealing the necklace that sat neatly upon a little white cushion. Wanda's expression falters, staring at it for a moment before turning to look at me with the most precious gaze I had ever seen. Her eyes radiated warmth, love seeping from merely her stare as she looks back at the necklace and li s it from its place. For a split second, I was absolutely terrified she was going to tell me she hated it or something. "Help me?" She asks and I nod, taking the necklace from her hands as she shi s to position her back to me. "I really hate being single." Sam sighs, taking a big gulp of his drink that breaks the silence as everyone pokes fun at him. The conversation flows as Wanda and I stay in our little bubble, hooking the necklace locked behind her neck as I adjust her hair to cascade right over the thin chains. "This is beautiful." She whispers to me, turning as her fingers carefully carress the pendant that hung upon her chest and in that moment, I know for a fact I made the right choice. It looked beautiful, hanging there above her heart—right where it should be. "I love you." She says, a beaming smile as she pulls me in to plant a quick kiss that thankfully, everyone misses. If they had seen it, we'd definitely never hear the end of it. It didn't take long before the night dwindled out, with Sam opting to sleep on the couch while the rest of us headed back to our rooms. James bid everyone goodnight, wishing all of us a Merry Christmas before leaving the compound. Steve also headed out for a quick jog, because apparently when Captain America is drunk, fitness is still his top priority while Natasha, Wanda and I took the elevator down to our floor. "Oh— here's what you asked for." Natasha notes as we step out of the elevator, handing me a paper bag as I quickly thank her before parting ways. "What's that?" Wanda asks, pushing my bedroom door open as we both head inside. "I just have to make another stop before we settle in. Will you wait for me here?" I ask, digging through my drawer to grab the last present I had hidden as Wanda comes up behind me to wrap her arms around my waist. "You're going to see her, aren't you?" She asks so ly, rocking us lightly as she presses gentle kisses to the back of my neck. With a smile, I turn around, o ering her a small nod as she pulls me in to connect our lips. "Tell Lara I said Merry Christmas and yes, i'll be right here when you get back." She smiles warmly, making my heart melt as I give her one last kiss before heading out once again. Just like that, feeling the world on my fingertips I make my way down. I had never felt so happy, so genuinely, completely happy. The

tingling in my bones, my heart swelling in my chest, the comforting silence that surrounded and all the pretty little lights— I felt like a kid in dreamland. All I've ever wanted was right there with me, and for the first time in a long time there was nowhere else in the world I'd rather be. "Is Jess around?" I ask one of the few doctors le in the lab, the woman turning to me almost surprised that I even acknowledged her. "She's in her o ice." She mutters, quickly going back to her work as I head over to plant a few knocks on Jess' door. I push inside, peeking in to find Jess with a cup of co ee in her hand and as usual, a pile of papers stacked on her desk. "Hey— hey." She smiles, scrambling to fix her glasses and smoothen her clothes as I step inside. "Merry Christmas, even if you don't look so... merry." I tease as Jess steps around her desk, coming to give me a quick hug as she steps "Merry Christmas. I promise it's merry, I just always look like hell. What's up?" She asks, raising her brows as I hold up the items in my "I've got kind of a crazy idea and I really... really need your help." I smile nervously and she gives me a look, a look that dreads what i'm about to ask, a look that screams she knows i'm there for trouble. And she was right. "I can't believe you talked me into this. You half twenty minutes, okay?" Jess warns, a hand on her card as we stood outside Lara's door—but not the usual door I go through. It was the one that led to her side of the room. "That's all I need." I beam, having a hard time to contain my excitement as Jess releases a so sigh. "If things get ugly, I have to call the guards. You know that." She adds, her concern shining through as I nod eagerly. "It's going to get rough at first but I can handle it. Only call in the guards if I pass out, please." I beg, and she nods a er a few moments of hesitance. "Good luck." She says, sliding her card as a beeping sound rings through the air, the door light turning green as I step into a small space. The actual door that led to her room soon hisses, sliding into the wall and granting me access as I take a breath and walk inside. "What do you want no—" Lara sits up from her bed, freezing completely when her eyes land on me— standing just a few feet away with nothing to keep us separate. "What the fuck." She mumbles under her breath, eyes glued to my face like she was trying to make sure I was real and not some twisted hologram. I set the bag down on the ground, my heart daring to rip through my chest now that i'm standing just inches away. The nerves were hitting harder than I thought, the silence was deafening as the thick air nearly sinks me into place. I was waiting for her to do something— to say something because I wasn't sure I could. Lara carefully crawls o her bed, getting to her feet and moving all without taking her eyes o of me. She grabs one of her makeshi paper balls from the ground, never daring to falter her stare as she tosses the paper right at me head with full force. It hits me square in the face, my eyes shutting on instinct as I flinch at the light but yet irritatingly scratchy impact. "What the hell?" I finally speak, looking back at Lara in confusion as she's standing on the opposite end of the room. "So you're real?" She asks, and I nod like it was the most obvious thing. At my confirmation, her face instantly drops as a small smirk begins to crawl onto her lips. Then she approaches. Safe to say I totally saw it coming, because I hadn't even been standing there for five minutes and she's already hell bent on attacking me. I dodge her every blow, slow and sloppy probably because she's been pretty dormant the past week. She keeps going at it until finally, I end it with one harsh shove that sends her flying to the wall by her bed, landing her square on the mattress with a breathless thud. I was really not in the mood for a boxing match. "Are you finished? Just let me know if you're not so I can get into my workout clothes. Fucking hell." I dust myself o, stretching my fingers and my rather sore arms from blocking all her punches and kicks. "What are you doing here? Are you finally going to end me? Send me o to prison? What is it?" She hisses, glaring at me as I stomp over to grab the items I brought in with me. "It's Christmas, you dimwit. I got you dinner and a gi , so stop trying to kill me for just five minutes." I fire back, walking over to her and hastily holding out the paper bag that contained her gi s, and a neatly packed container of the food we had earlier. I approached Natasha before dinner, asking if she could fix a plate I could take to Lara and she was more than happy to help. Lara looks at the bag in my hand, then back up at me before harshly yanking it out of my grip and begrudgingly tearing it open. She eventually reveals a wrapped present and a rather large container that had pretty much a little bit of everything we ate a few hours prior. I knew the food in the compound was complete and utter shit, so I thought maybe Lara would appreciate something nice for even just a day. "What game are you playing?" She flatly asks, looking up at me with hostility as she sets everything down on her bed. "No game just... I can't make up for all the holidays I missed but i'm here and I wanted to try. You don't have to like me but just, let me sit here with you for a bit." I say, backing up until i'm on the opposite end of the room and moving to set myself on the ground. "This doesn't change anything." Lara says a er a few moments, turning away hastily as I watch her eyes land on the still wrapped present. I could practically see the gears turning behind her eyes, contemplation smearing her features as a sigh falls from my lips. "Just open it already." I say, earning a glare as she begrudgingly complies. She tears the wrapper, my breath stilled and heart frozen as she unravels a journal I picked out for her. Well, it was more like a hard bound sketch book but the important and most noteworthy part was that it was The Little Prince themed. Every page had the dierent planets and little quotes at the bottom, all that reminded me of our simpler times. For a split second, it happens again. I see it in her eyes, the way her body slumps and her fingers trace over the paged, the way her breath hitches and that look on her face. The same look I saw on the little girl, almost a decade ago who buried herseld under her teddy bear covers, peering up at me trying to keep her eyes open as I read the same paragraph over ten times because she was too sleepy to understand and kept asking me to start over. I see her, I see my sister. It takes everything in me not to reach out, not to get on my knees and beg her to stay. My bones ached to speak, but I was afraid. I was afraid that even the slightest sound would take it all away, so I sit there holding everything back—my heart in my hands as I pray to the universe for this moment to last, even for one night. But it doesn't, not with Lara—because just as it appears, it's gone. It spirals back into the deepest part of her, falling into the darkness as she tosses the book aside and turns to me. "You need to leave." She says, tired and defeated. "Please." She says, it was so so , but I caught it. She sounded so tired, so drained that I don't argue, not even when I wanted to. I just silently get up, motioning to the camera that I knew Jess was watching to open the door. A few moments later, it clicks open and I take one last look at Lara who has laid back down onto her bed, curled up as she faced the wall. I wonder if she knew there was nothing in the world I wouldn't do for her. I quickly thank Jess a er, avoiding her concerns as much as I could and heading up to my room. When I arrive, just as promised, Wanda was right there. She had apparently wheeled her TV in and was in the middle of watching one of her sitcoms. She looked so small, buried under the coverse in her tank top, a warm smile beaming back at me the moment I step in. "How was it?" She asks, instantly sitting up as I pull my shirt over my head to change into something more comfortable to sleep in. "It was... okay." I hum so ly, heading to my drawers to fish out a tank top as well before stripping myself of my jeans and bra. "Are you okay?" She sounds concerned, her voice was rounded and so the way it always is when she feels me slipping. I guess I was just too tired to hide my disappointment as I pull the top over my head and crawl under the covers that she holds open for me. "I got her this sketch book thing. It was The Little Prince themed, had all the quotes and everything." I share amidst a heavy breath, letting her pull me in to rest my head on her chest as I drape an arm over her stomach. "It was her favorite book, we used to read it every night. When she saw the gi , I could swear— even for a split second that she was there. That she was back, that I had my Lara back." I divulge, nearly wincing at the memory of the look on her face. Wanda trails her fingers against my back, trying to soothe my heavy heart as she listened intently. "And then it was just... gone. She asked me to leave. I was barely even there." I mumble, the visual fresh on my mind as she sighs. "She's still in there. She is. I know it can feel hopeless, but don't give up." She whispers, planting a kiss atop my head as I look to meet her "What if she never stops hating me?" I ask, my fears on full display as desperation laces my words. She's holding me tighter, warm, kind eyes pouring over me as she releases a so breath. "She just needs time. Everything will be okay eventually." Wanda so ly soothes, moving her free hand to cup my face with so much tenderness I instantly melt into her touch. "You're a beautiful voice of reason, did you know that?" I smile, feeling her so laughter vibrate against my body as she moves to press her lips to mine. "I just love you, that's all." She mumbles against my lips, her infectious smile making my heart jump as I move to slip a hand behind her neck, pulling her closer to deepen the kiss. "Merry Christmas." She breathes happily, pulling away but still

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keeping her forehead rested against mine as I intertwine my fingers in

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her hair with a smile.

"Merry Christmas."