of hangovers.

Even the way I felt.

4

I woke up like any normal day, well-I don't know if I could even deem more than eight hours of sleep normal but at least the brain squeezing headache was gone, it was like it never even existed. But of course, I should have known everything came with a price because what took the place of a throbbing head was the memories of hours prior, flashing in my mind with desperate intensity as if to slap the mess I've made onto my face, over and over. Wanda, Steve, Nat, everything came back against my wishes. I tried with all my might to wash it away under another burning stream, to scrub so hard I could peel o my skin trying to get the lingering remnants of such vulnerability washed away. God, I hate remembering, I hate everything that happened. Wanda's face was most prominent in my head, her words echoing like an alarm clock I couldn't throw against the wall and make go away, especially not when she walks into the training room, a bag slung

shouldgo, even if it was painful. "I can't do today." I say without taking the time to properly look at her, my only view being her reflection in the mirror plastered on the wall past the bag. "What? Why?" She tries to question, attempting to mask just how much my reply had taken her aback. The hope in her voice was excruciating to hear, like she was expecting something di erent from me. "Not today, okay? I'll talk to Steve; he can go back to helping you." I hu, tending back to my rapid punches, feeling the hard surface collide with my fists and leaving Wanda standing there, confused.

"Hey." She utters with a hint of hesitance as I still the punching bag

swinging rapidly before me. This could go one of two ways, depending on how I play my cards but there was only one way it

around her shoulder and a small smile on her lips.

"I just... thought we were getting somewhere." She says, deflating and frail as my chest tightens once more. I give the bag another hard punch, watching it fly o Its hinges and fall to the ground a few feet away with a harsh thud as I spin around to face the expectant witch, beads of sweat rolling down my forehead

as she looks back at me, stunned and frozen. I needed to forget, I needed things to stay like they were, with her hating me, looking at me with uninterested revulsion instead of that unbearable pity, I'd take her loathing any day than to look into her eyes and see the same thing I've been seeing since anybody figured out what my life was made of. defeated under my daggered gaze.

"Where is that, exactly?" I seethe, heaving from the exertion I put into "But last night-" end of my intolerance and lies.

my punches. She looked uncomfortable, retreated, maybe even "What are you talking about?" I cut her o , my incredulous tone burning right through her as she stood speechless, at the receiving

"But you said..." She tries to begin again, clearly stumbling over her thoughts as I silence her with a sco, walking over to the bag and hanging it back in place. "I was drunk, Wanda. People say shit when they're drunk, don't tell me you were stupid enough to believe anything I said?" The words le a vile taste on my tongue, my heart sinking at the way she looks back at me in disbelief, in hurt, in betrayal.

a

"You're supposed to be smart, not naïve. People come to you with emotions and you just roll over and show your belly? You'll never make it like that. Look, I don't even remember what happened last night and it'd do you good to forget it too, because it meant nothing." There was a part of me screaming for her to see through my unforgiving lies, but all at once I knew it had to be done. "You... are such a coward. I won't bother you again, don't worry." She sco s bitterly, giving me one last look before turning around and walking away, her steps fading into the distance as I finally take a

breath I didn't realize I was holding. Her words bore into my chest, unwavering despite the space she le. I turn back to the bag, punching so hard it flies to the rack of weights that clang loudly as they fall, scattering on the ground along with the aching rage dripping from my fingertips. She couldn't begin to have an idea of what I am, of what she was talking about, of the corner I was squeezed into. I had the idiocy of thinking that feeling would go away, but a hundred punches later and a more prominent mess, I sprawled onto the floor, still heaving and uneasy. I felt like a latch about to break, and I was right. It happened later in the day, in a training session I had with a handful

of agents. All men, all of them with prejudiced gazes, whispered conversations that I tried so hard to ignore. It was already a bad day, a day filled with confusion, irritation and the haunting sound of Wanda Maximo walking away looking the most disappointed I had ever seen. As I stood before those men, trying to demonstrate defense tactics when in combat with somebody who had a knife, one of them snickers. Then the rest of them do. "They're really letting anyone in, huh?" It grazes my hearing just enough, but still I tried to ignore it and keep going. "This compound is more like a charity center nowadays." Another one

throws in, his words striking the last thread that kept me together as I swi ly throw the knife, the blade just barely slicing his cheek as it digs into the wall behind him. They all stood, stunned to silence as the man brings a hand up to the splots of blood seeping through his cut, horrified eyes looking upon his crimson tainted fingers as they all turn to me, ba led and skin as I push past the rest, stopping only inches before the man who had fear swirling in his eyes at my distance. "Next time you talk about me, make sure I won't be around to hear it." I say through gritted teeth, brushing past him so harshly he takes several steps back just to regain balance as I storm out of the room. I felt the walls closing in, the air running out as I bolted, leaving the

mess behind. I hated the comfort, the familiarity that the fear in his eyes brought, watching him tremble at my mercy felt—like what I knew. I needed to breathe; I needed space- I needed to not feel this way. When I reach the ground floor, without a single word I head for the doors, only to be stopped by an agent with a harsh hand on my chest and a stern look that pointed me in Maria's direction, watching

from the balcony on the second level.

"You can't leave." She says in a tune, reminding me.

"Please. I just need air- I really need air." In a frantic state, I call out to her, taking her by surprise as I stood there, a thin layer of sweat covering my skin and dirtied wraps entangled around my hands. "I won't go beyond the walls, I just can't stay here." I practically plead, all eyes turning to watch me fall apart as Maria's brows furrow into uncertainty, speechless in her spot. "Let her go." Steve chimes in, walking out of one of the rooms as everyone turns to look at him, all except Maria. "She's under strict assessment-" "I don't care, let her go." Steve cuts her o, stopping a few feet away from me and turning around, head hung back to settle his eyes on the irritated woman above. "I'm going with her." Steve adds with a small sigh, both of us intently watching as Maria signals the agents to let me through. Without another word, Steve leads me out to the broad lawn, concern ridden

on his face when I topple over and start gasping for air.

through hell.

misplacement.

my words were coming from.

myself within the circumstances.

"Must be one heck of a hangover." Steve hums from beside me, his hand gently circling my back in support as my staggered breaths fill the air. My hair frames my face, messy and slipping from my ponytail due to all the ruckus, I must have looked like I've been dragged

"It's- I don't feel right. This doesn't feel right." I croak out in between

"What doesn't?" He asks gently, eyeing my face for any sign of where

misplaced." I manage to push out, doing the best I could to express

"Adjustment takes time, when I came out of the ice everything felt di erent too. I didn't know anybody, didn't recognize anybody. It felt

heaves as I straighten my posture, turning to look at Steve.

"I don't feel...being here feels wrong. Every second feels...

like in the blink of an eye, my old life was replaced by something new. Look, I'd be lying if I told you that it goes away. Sometimes I still feel like I don't belong, but I have a mission and so do you. You need to get your sister back, that's why you're here." Steve says with perseverance, gentle eyes looking upon me as he settles a hand on my shoulder. "I'm not like you, you know that." I shakily utter, looking to him with hooded eyes as the horrifying vision swarms me again. I wanted to kill that man and I knew it. "I know you're trying to do the right thing and so am I." He replies so ly. If he only knew— if he even had an inkling of how I truly felt he wouldn't be standing there with so much concern, so much sympathy.

And it dawns on me that they were right. Every judge filled look, every malicious whisper, every second of distrust and uncertainty was justified and all I was, all I am is an imposter. I look back at Steve with a look that he thinks is his words aiding me, but really it's just the agonizing realization that I deserved every waking minute of

Then Steve's phone rings, he sends me a polite smile before picking it up, one that drops the moment whoever's words hit his ears. He looks at me with urgency, a look I knew never meant well— at least in

my experience. His hushed mumbles turn into deafening white noise as the sun sets above us, clarity fading along with the moments as he clicks the phone shut. "There's an update on Lara." We race back to the building, all emotion draining from my tired body as dread takes it's place. Steve heads right for the stairs, with me hot on his trail as we get to the conference room that was already filled with the team— all standing around the table with frowns and furrowed brows and horrified looks— all of which shi to me.

"What happened?" I break the silence, I know those looks—they're

Do you ever have a moment that unfolds in slow motion? Like time slows down just for you, marinating you in anxiety, in painful anticipation and no matter how hard your heart fights to break through your skin and bones, you're powerless. That moment—that was my slow motion moment. I've had a handful but none of them

"What?" I exclaim, my voice laced with desperation shaking the room. My eyes gloss over each of them, Sam, Vision, James, Nat and even

the kind people have before they tell you someone died.

bore it's claws into me the way that did.

Wanda— even Wanda looked upset.

any signs— anything to end the anticipation.

a dull blade tearing through skin.

"Lexa... She planted the bomb."

for Natasha's.

nearly fi y people.

was fighting herself.

as the rest and I do the same.

leaning it up against the jet's walls.

her takes her by surprise.

Please don't make this any harder.

the first thing on her mind at the situation.

my eyes with caution.

presented information.

surface." Steve further instructs.

for his question.

ride.

Frozen.

"There was a bombing, just minutes ago in Munich." Natasha was the first one to speak, standing by the head of the table, an unreadable expression on her face. My heart stops, the deafening white noise, the thrashing, the slow motion stops and it's like everything and the world comes to a screeching halt. The air is stilled, impossible to take in as my entire body tenses up as if it were preparing to get hit—to get hurt. "Is she dead?" Is the words that fall out of my lips, my eyes refusing to tear away from Natasha as I desperately tried to scavenge her face for

"Forty six people died." She continues, her pace was agonizing—like

"Is. She. Dead." I repeat through gritted teeth, my hands balling up into fists as silence meets my rage, all eyes deviating from me except

That's how everything felt. When her words hit my ears, everything goes blank. Her lips were moving, all of theirs were, but I couldn't hear it. Steve was trying to get through to me, his hands were on my shoulders but I couldn't feel a thing. Not a single thing. I just stood there, feeling the floor open up and chain me in place, paralyzed, stunned. I couldn't di erenciate which was worse, hearing she was dead or that she caused it—the sweet little girl under the blanket fort that I read stories to and laughed at all my jokes—she just killed

"Lexa— Lexa you have to hear me right now, we need to go." Steve

"The quinjet is ready outside, we have to go now. We traced her

says, shaking me slightly as I snap out of the in between.

location back to a nearby base." Natasha instructs like she's done it a million times, only this time she was looking right at me with sympathy lingering in her cold gaze. "I need to say something before we do." I utter out, earning everyone's eyes. "If she gets her hands on me, you have to let me go." I don't think i've ever stood amidst thicker silence than I did right there, each of their faces were conflicted, melancholic—pitiful. "We can talk about it on the jet—" Natasha tries to begin dismissively, heading for the door when I block her path.

"You have to let me go. If you kill her— you might as well kill me too." I plead, standing so close I could feel her holding her breath. Her eyes go over me, like she was trying to understand my words—like she

"We'll let you go." She gives in coldly, stepping around me to walk out

A er a quick few minutes of preparation, we make it all out to the launch pad— the entire team suited up as Steve approaches me, his shield strapped to his arm as we board the jet together. Natasha and the others were already inside, busy putting the coordinates in and communicating with who I assume to be Maria. Steve leads me to one of the seats, a gentle hand on my shoulder as he sets his shield down,

"I need you to be prepared. We need to tackle this as a team— I know emotions are running high right now but you have to remember that the most ideal outcome is coming back with both of you. Not none."

He says with a so sigh, blue eyes looking right into mine as he anticipates a reply—one I wasn't sure he wanted to hear. "I know." I mumble, taking a seat as Steve looks over me one last time, parting to join Natasha by the head of the jet as the engines start up. As the rumble begins beneath our feet, my eyes meet Wanda's, who was right next to Sam on the other side of the jet. She was playing with her rings again, moving them around her fingers as conflict washes over her features. I didn't know what was going to happen, if i'd be coming back— she looked like she was waiting for me to say something. A part of me wanted to, as well. "If you're trying to read my mind, I'm going to throw this shield right at you." Is what I come up with, watching as my acknowledgement of

"As if you can even throw it right." She rolls her eyes, making a move to get up once the jet is stable in the air. I watch her with curiosity, intrigue sparking with the realization that she was heading to me.

"That wasn't an invite for you to come over." I say venomously as she takes the empty seat to my right. It was easier that way, petty jabs and sarcasm was the easiest way to get through the nerve racking

"Can you stop being an asshole for a minute." Wanda groans, leaning

"I hope she's okay." She breathes out a er a few moments, meeting

"She just killed a bunch of people and that's what you're going to say?" My brows raise at her words, unable to believe that was really

"HYDRA is... cruel. They make you do things you don't want to and it - changes you. I'd like to think that she's just as much of a victim if you're fighting this hard to get to her." Wanda says with a barely there, tight lipped smile. Her words catch me o guard as the urge to blanket us in rage and avoidance washes over me—she was making

back as she intertwines her hands on her lap. I watch her face, practically seeing the gears turn in her head at what to say next.

it hard. "She's a good person, despite what any of you may think." I give in, letting my defenses down for a moment as I turn away to slouch over and bury my face in my hands. "I know." She whispers, it barely floats through the air, so so that its gone before it can even exist but I catch it. I catch it and I don't say a word. "Everybody gather please." Steve calls out a few minutes in, standing by a table in the middle of the jet.

Wanda and I simultaneously rise to our feet, along with the others who gather around to find a screen on the surface, one that displayed a digital blueprint marked with dierent colors. Steve stood tall by the head of it, Natasha by his side as everyone gazes upon the

"The facility has three entry points, which we all need to be weary of. We have two top priorities, first is to find Lara Kovacs and second is to locate and secure the stolen bio-hazards and get it on this jet. Sam and Nat are coming with me, we'll be pushing the main and biggest entrance over here." Steve zooms in on the blueprint; motioning to a

red circle he most likely drew to visualize his instructions.

"Rhodey will secure the north-east entrance, Wanda and Lexa take the west entrance and Vision will take care of possible agents on the

"If anyone other than Lexa or Wanda have eyes on Lara, give us a heads up immediately and do not engage." Natasha chimes in, giving

"And if she engages us?" James asks, sending me an apologetic smile

"Try and lead her back to the jet. Nat is ready with heavy sedation, if things can't be worked out. Lexa, you have to understand we need a fallback. We're going into this with minimal information on your sister and as of right now, she's a wildcard." Steve turns to address

The mere thought of it was unsettling, pumping my little sister full of drugs, knocking her out. Hours prior I would have been against it, I would have been angered by the mention of such a plan being in

the group a once over but lingering her eyes on me.

me directly, all anticipative gazes shooting my way.

place—but she just killed forty six people. She wasn't the same girl I le behind and as much as a part of me wanted to sink into denial, that shining fact was glaring right at my face. So with a heavy heart, I send Steve a small nod. "Lexa your main mission is to locate and contact Lara, try and talk to her— and as much as possible try to avoid any added casualties. Wanda, the lab is close to your entry point so go for the bio-hazards and get them out to Vision. We're expecting heavy machinery, apparently the place is packed so everybody, eyes up and stay sharp." Steve hands out the earpieces to everyone, giving me a reassuring smile as he passes. "You nervous?" Sam hums with a smile, looking right at Natasha.

"Cause you might get choked out by another Kovacs." Sam stifles a laugh, immediately backing up with his hands raised when Natasha

"How about I choke you out? Y'know, for experience." Natasha glares

I retreat back to my seat, Wanda already having reclaimed her place right next to me as the tension lingers. It was one of those moments when you're just waiting for someone to talk, for one of us to say something about the criticality of what we're about to jump into but there was so much to say and so little time. Wanda was back to playing with her rings, each of us settling into a tense, but somewhat tolerable silence as the others fall into casual conversation, well all except for Steve, who spent the time going over the prints and files

"Is he always that serious?" I ask so ly, looking over at Steve as Wanda shi s from beside me, following my line of sight.

nonchalance, mimicking my position and propping her elbows upon

"How are you feeling?" Wanda speaks up with caution, like she was

"None of your business." I quickly revert to my coldness, we had been

"Look..." She begins with hesitance, a so sigh escaping her lips as I

"We don't have to keep doing this back and forth." I jump in before she gets another word out, pushing her into silence that deviates her

"I meant every word I've said. You can't be so... easily manipulated. You're smarter than that, you need to be." It comes out with the same di iculty, the same tense armour that builds around every inch of

"Why do you do it? Why are you so scared of being honest?" She breathes of defeat, eyes unwavering from the ground— not even

"I am being honest— can we not do this now? If you want to host me an intervention at least wait until we finish the mission." It shoots out of me almost as a default, when I feel cornered—when I feel real, the

"I was going to say I forgive you." Wanda groans, falling back to lean into her seat with irritation. Her hands break apart, falling to her lap

only solace I could ever find Is in daggered words.

"He takes these things very seriously." Wanda replies with

trying to tread over eggshells on such a sensitive topic.

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as their playful banter continues.

with a stern look on his face.

civil long enough.

me.

turn to meet her eyes.

bothering to look back at me.

in defeat. Why was she trying so hard to find middle ground for us? It was almost insulting, feeling like her intentions were born completely out of pity. "I was never sorry." "You're impossible." Wanda chuckles bitterly, shi ing to get up and head back across the jet to leave me all to my rampant thoughts. And just like that, it's how it's supposed to be. Wanda doesn't even glance my way for the rest of the ride, which was surprisingly short- probably given the fact that we were going at an unreadable speed. Steve, who was previously buried under the contents of the events to unfold, takes the spot next to me. He doesn't say a word, I don't think he needs to. He just sits with me until Natasha calls for us to get ready, and so we do. James was first to drop out, already suited up and flying o . Next was Sam, then

Vision. Natasha lands the jet a few kilometres from the base as Steve

"Remember what we're here for." Steve says one last time as Nat clicks the last gun onto her belt, giving me a reassuring nod before heading out with Steve, leaving Wanda and I standing by the exit.

"I'm not leaving without her, I need you to know that." I say to Wanda,

So we head out, following Steve's orders and taking the base from the west wing. The sun was beginning to set, nightfall quickly approaching as Wanda and I tread up the hill, making our way through the trees with ease. Soon enough, we both spot the fence that circles the facility's perimeter and once we get close enough, we realize it looks... empty. Wanda and I exchange confused glances as she uses her magic to pry open the assumed electric fence, making a

"Steve are you seeing this? Is anyone on your end?" I speak into the earpiece, hushing my tone enough to a cautious degree as we stand amidst an abundance of space where trucks and agents should be.

"It's clear here too but we're picking up heat signatures from inside. It could be a trap, stay alert." Steve's voice rings through the device, promptly clicking o as Wanda and I approach the entrance to the

"It's empty here too. I'm in position." James then follows up.

"It appears to be completely empty." Even Vision replies with

gun pointed in the direction of the lit and yet empty hallway.

"Something isn't right." Wanda whispers as I begin to step inside, eyes focused sternly ahead as the sole of my boots collide with the

"This is either the easiest mission ever or we are about to get fucked."

I whip around every corner, a finger on the trigger and still, we're met with silence. The strangest part of it all was that the facility didn't look cleared out, all the o ices were stocked with files, holding cells chock full of clutter like everyone was there a moment ago, and they somehow vanished. Wanda trails closely behind me, her crimson energy swirling at the ready between her fingertips as she covers my

"Vision, what's it looking like up there." Steve asks, a cautious tone

"Okay, on my mark. One, two, three." Steve counts down and we hear a series of ruckus from a distance. I give Wanda a go signal, stepping aside as she takes the door o Its hinges. I instantly step into frame, a

puts on his headgear and slips an arm behind his shield.

The doors open, we take one look at each other.

who looks at me with an unreadable expression.

hole big enough for both of us to slip through.

"I know."

facility.

confusion.

metal flooring.

I whisper, shaking my head.

trail, looking out from behind me.

she made no e ort to fight.

move.

It's pitch black.

dent beneath my grasp.

to wash me in relief.

lingering in his words.

computers were even powered, various files scattered on the screen as the beeping of the machines fill the silence. Right in the middle of it, was a crate that was stamped with the logo of the military, apparently becoming what we came for. "We have eyes on the stolen materials." Wanda speaks into her device as we come to a halt by the glass that looked into the empty room. She makes a move to open the door and I can't exactly explain why, but a jolt of danger soars through me and my hand finds her wrist to pull her back. I had a horrible feeling churning in my stomach, one I couldn't will myself to ignore. "I'll go in." I say as her eyes land on me, brows furrowed into confusion as I move around her, sliding the glass door open and stepping inside. She must have sensed my determination, because

Wanda watches from outside, eyes never leaving me with every step I

took. Each one was hooded, filled to the brim with cautious uncertainty as I expected some sort of trap to go o, but nothing does. I make it to the crate, trying not to drown in familiarity as I e ortlessly take it into my arms. When I get to the door, Wanda instantly tries to help but when she goes to tug it open, it doesn't

"What's the situation down there?" Steve calls in through the earpieces, almost as if he had an inkling of our little obstacle.

"I can't — I can't open it!" Wanda grunts, stepping back as her magic reappears in her hands. There's a determined look on her face, readying herself to move when all at once the lights go out.

"Wanda?" I instantly call when she pops out of view, desperation dripping from my tone as my movements still to a halt. My grip around the crate tightens, fingers digging into the metal as I feel it

"I'm here." She replies, mu led by the glass but still audible enough

"Wanda? Lexa? Can anybody hear me?" Natasha's choppy signal comes through in fragments, her words barely coherent as It's

blanketed in rough buzzing and disconnection.

trying to use her magic to pry open the door.

shadow behind her, that only kept getting closer.

We eventually get to the lab, which also looked fully stocked. The

My heart drops in my chest as I set the crate down, feeling for the door and going to ram my fist through it. It doesn't budge. The glass won't break. Wanda uses her magic in spritz, crimson glow providing fleeting illumination around her as I continue trying to break through. With every unsuccessful punch, it gets harder to breathe. "Nat? Steve? James? Anybody?" I try and call out, pressing the earpiece deeper into my skin out of frustration as I stood there, heaving and on edge amidst the darkness. "Something... Here..." James' broken voice pushes through the horrid buzzing as the deafening silence is soon replaced by distanced shots. "You have to go." I scream at Wanda through the glass, who was still

In her final burst, she wasn't alone. A silhouette stood behind her, my eyes nearly pop out of my sockets as I desperately thrash my fists against the glass, begging for Wanda to stop and listen to me. She was brushing me o, focusing on the door without any mind to what was coming. The harsh glow of her magic shows me enough of the

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cracking and coming together with every harsh pound on the thick glass. The pain was shooting up my arm, but in moments like those you don't have time to feel. "I'm not leaving you!" She exclaims angrily, frustration engulfing her every word as I take in a huge breath. Why the hell did she have to be so stubborn? "Behind you!" I give in, screaming with all my might. In a swi gust of wind, Wanda's magic fades into nothing as a thud echoes through the air. The familiar sound drains everything inside me, I knew it all too well. It was the sound of a body hitting the ground. My blood runs cold as I use all the strength I have to try and break the unflinching glass. I see nothing on the other side, no

"You need to go!" I scream with utmost desperation, my bones

Wanda, no magic, no light, it was like everything beyond that room was erased. Then the lights come back on. All that stood before me was an empty hallway, barely even a trace that anybody was there. I press up against the glass, trying with all my strength to see as much as I can, to catch a glimpse of Wanda, any

"Fuck!" I scream, delivering one last punch to the glass, hoping it would make a di erence. But it doesn't and I was alone. Or so I thought. You see, when you train enough you get quite skilled at heightening your senses. Your eyes seem sharper, your sense of touch, smell, taste, they all get honed to be extremely aware of your surroundings. A er all, your life was on the line. The need for survival comes with a certain gust of adrenaline, and in that moment I knew.

I felt her, I felt her right behind me. I wasn't alone, her so, short breaths were something I could practically feel, as though she was breathing down my neck. Without ever needing to turn around, my body feels weak, my chest caving in as the only thought that runs through my head is the way she was so close, and all at once still a million miles away. Lara. Continue reading next part $\ \square$

sign of her whereabouts but everything was empty, clean, unsettling at most. I don't remember the last time I ever felt so helpless, the last time I ever lost control on a mission. I was used to being the one that was feared, doors would lock to keep me out, and guns would draw to keep me at bay- not the other way around. I also wasn't used to caring about anyone in such a critical situation. "Wanda?" I call out, my frantic voice filling the air. I needed something, to see something- to hear anything. This is what I meant by not making it harder than it needs to be, the setback of not being alone, the anxiety, the emotions were nothing but liabilities. "Steve? I lost Wanda. Steve, come in!" I try once more, but the line was dead. All I was met with was an empty buzz of isolation.