24

Silence is the loudest sound.

It's overused and cheesy, but it's true. You never understand just how uneasy it can be, how terrifying the lack of noise truly is. First, your ears begin to ring and you think it only gets louder and louder— like your head is going to pop. Then your thoughts begin to flood, that voice in your head that kicks in to ease the incessant ringing and you're left wondering what's worse, feeling like your head is a balloon that keeps expanding or feeling like you're going crazy.

But sometimes, when reality is bad enough— insanity becomes attractive. What most people fear, becomes a paradise of escape. When reality means walls closing in and chest caving, going insane sounds like a dream. Anything to keep you from feeling the truth, that the life you're living is nothing but cruel and desperate— or in my case, non-negotiable.

When you lose the luxury of choice, everything becomes dull, meaningless, like every path you take isn't your own but merely forced upon you by fate. By a story that has an ending that was already written and laid out, no deviance, no liberty— just illusion. Living feels like a chore, and when you realize the resentment, the guilt seeps in. The thought that a lot of people wish for more time while people like me, people who don't want it are stuck.

I must have spent hours in that room, Lara and I just sitting in deafening silence until my bones began to ache and my limbs began to numb. The only thing that really got me up and out, was the relentless grumbling of my stomach. I hadn't eaten a bite since lunch the day prior, and it was really taking a toll.

As I step into the elevators, Tony's words instantly echo in my head. I just had a rough day and I wasn't too thrilled by the thought of heading to the cafeteria and choking down another sandwich that tasted like cardboard— but the prospect of stepping into the dinner exhausted me just by the mere thought.

I chose neither.

I still had a few apples left in my room, some crackers to go with it. It wasn't like i'd die– ironically. So I press the button for my floor, slumping back against the wall in a tired breath as I wait for the elevator to open. The moment it does, instead of a clear path, i'm blocked by a black suit and a smug smile that only makes my irritation spike.

"You're relentless." I groan as Tony flashes me a big smile, stepping inside and wasting no time in getting the doors closed.

"I simply want to make amends. I'm turning over a new leaf— god, that still sounds disgustingly cliche." He chuckles to himself, tapping a button that I assume corresponds to where his dinner is held.

"Look, I was upset and kind of drunk that night and maybe... I said things I shouldn't have." He begins with a small, subtly begrudged sigh.

"You're really going to make me say it? Come on." He whines, looking at me through his glasses as I only raise a brow, folding my arms over my chest as he releases a tired breath.

"I'm sorry." He finally says, looking like the words were foreign on his tongue as he bites back a look of uneasiness.

Apology was one thing I never knew Tony Stark was capable of, amongst other things. As uncomfortable as he looked, the fact that he took the time to come find me— to say it, was something I wasn't going to discredit. I look back at him silently, eyes tracing over his face as he returns my gaze expectantly, waiting for me to say something.

"You were right." I mumble, watching his brows furrow as he tilts his head like he wasn't sure of what he just heard.

"You were an asshole, but you said what most people think of me. At least you said it to my face." I sigh, turning ahead and tearing my eyes away from him.

"It doesn't go away." He softly replies.

"The... blame, the guilt. The feeling that every time you try to make things better, you leave it worse than when you found it. It doesn't go away." He says, the heaviness of his sentiments dripping from his tone as he slumps back against the wall right next to me.

"So how do you live with yourself?" I say, so softly in fear that my voice would tremble if I said it any louder.

"You just... keep trying. Keep hoping that maybe it'll pay off somehow, that you're still... good." He says amidst a looming sense of defeat.

"I should have been there." He looks back at me right as the doors ding open.

"I should have stopped it." I reply with a sad, tight lipped smile.

We look at each other for a moment, each of us basking in the emotions we just shared and for a fleeting second, I didn't feel alone. In the most surprising turn of events, a plot twist I could have never seen coming, finding comfort in a man like Tony Stark felt impossible in this lifetime, or any other. But if there's one thing life keeps proving, is that sometimes you find solace in the strangest places.

Months ago I never, in a million years, thought i'd ever be standing where I am. In the compound, wearing my heart on my sleeve with Tony Stark right next to me— or having dinner with the Avengers, or practically being in love with a girl I swore I despised for years. But here I am, walking out of the elevator right by Tony, who easily plasters on his smug smile as all eyes turn to us.

"Look who I found." Tony proudly states, nodding over to me as Natasha rises from her seat instantly with a smile on her red lips.

"Hey." She approaches, her soothing voice hitting my ears as she takes my hand, leading me to the table where everyone was seated.

"Don't tell me you're glad to see me for the hundredth time today, Steve." I chuckle softly as Natasha leads me to the seat she once occupied, one right next to Steve who only laughs softly at my remark.

"Fine. I'll settle for good evening." He hums happily as I slip into my seat, my eyes travelling almost instantly to Wanda who sat across me on the far left end of the table, right next to Vision.

Both of us look lost on what to do, if she would smile or I would nod— if either of us would even acknowledge each other's presence. Before either of us could say a word, Sam's lively voice fills the air, looking right at me from the seat across to mine.

"Last time I saw you, you were kicking ass. Where you at these days?" He says amidst a playful smile.

"Retired and depressed. Last time I saw you, you were getting zero pussy at a party, where you at these days?" I counter jokingly as a wave of stifled laughter covers the table, with James nearly choking on his drink as Sam takes a quiet sip of his drink.

"Yeah, I deserved that." He shrugs.

"She's spending too much time with you, Natasha." Sam comments, shaking his head as Natasha tries to bite back a beaming smile.

"Really? I think that's a good thing." Natasha happily relaxes into her seat, a small laugh slipping from her lips as Tony lightly taps a spoon to his glass, garnering everyone's attention.

"Okay so as you all know, I won't be able to drop by for the christmas party thing— so this is me trying to make up for it. I just wanted to say that... i'm glad you're all okay." He says with a small sigh, earning coos mostly from Sam.

"Don't go soft on us now, Stark." Natasha comments playfully, earning a small glare from Tony.

"And that includes you, Lexa. Welcome to the team." Tony raises his glass, taking me by surprise as the rest all do the same.

I try to fight a cheek eating grin daring to spill onto my lips when Steve nudges me to join the cheers, reluctantly and almost nervously raising my glass as I shoot Tony a small nod of gratitude as the sound of our clinking glasses fill the room.

The dinner, much to my surprise, was going quite smoothly. Casual conversation over wine and some steak, it felt a million times farther from the first time I had tried to socialize in this room. All the bone aching tension, the awkward feeling of misplacement was almost replaced by complete normalcy, of course there was still a hint of reservation on my end, but it wasn't as miserable as I expected it to be.

"So I hear that you've been spending quite some time with Dr. Barrett, what's that about?" Tony speaks up from the head of the table, all eyes turning to me as I finish my glass of wine.

"The hot blonde one? Damn. Lucky." Sam comments as I feel Natasha tense up from right next to me.

"We're kind of just working together on Lara." I reply casually, a small smile on my lips at Sam's reaction as Natasha promptly gets up from her seat.

"I'll get more bottles." She excuses herself flatly, with Wanda quickly following suit and rising from her chair.

"I'll help." The two walk away, leaving the table in awkward silence as the rest of the team exchange looks.

"Did I miss something?" Sam asks, clearly confused by the sudden change in atmosphere— but he wasn't alone. Natasha's argument with Jess from earlier today floats to the top of my thoughts, sparking more curiosity than I initially fed it as Tony speaks up.

"Looks like we all missed something." He hums.

"Was it 'cause I called her hot? Is that it— was that offensive to women? We're you offended?" Sam scrambles, turning to look at me almost fearfully as I reluctantly shake my head.

"I don't think it's that." Steve speaks up, only offering the rest of us a small, hesitant smile to try and ease the tension.

"I overheard Nat and Jess— Dr. Barrett, arguing this morning. I don't know what about but maybe that's it?" I say uncertainly, feeling Steve immediately turn to me almost in surprise.

"What did you hear?" He asks, all eyes glued to me as I try to remember as vividly as I could.

"Something about choices? I'm not sure. I didn't hear much." I reply almost apologetically, because I couldn't offer more information.

"And Wanda?" Tony asks, mainly looking at Vision— which I try to pretend doesn't bother me at all.

"She's... going through a lot." Vision vaguely replies, glancing over at me as I look down at my plate.

Natasha returns with a few more bottles of wine and beer, loosely followed by Wanda who had the same thing in her arms. Thankfully, the conversation flows back to normal like we didn't just have a full blown discussion about their demeanor. The night unfolds with us moving over to the couch, plastered onto the loveseats and armchairs in front of the fireplace as snow began to fall outside.

"Are we doing the secret santa thing this year again?" Sam asks, sitting right by James as everyone hums with nonchalance.

"Secret santa?" I ask, completely unfamiliar with the term as Natasha speaks up from right beside me.

"Yeah— we all write down names, toss them in a bucket and whoever you pull out is the person you're going to get a gift for. The catch is, they can't find out it's you so you have to figure out what to get them in secret." She explains as I try to comprehend her words amidst a splew of alcohol running through my veins.

"Yeah and Nat is always the best at it." Steve comments lightly.

"Yeah, she'll find out everything about you in a day. The whole spy thing really puts her at an advantage." Sam agrees, taking a sip of his beer as Natasha chuckles softly.

"You're all just lazy." Natasha replies, shaking her head.

"I'm not lazy. I got Tony last year! What am I supposed to get like— the richest dude ever?" Sam complains as Tony laughs softly from beside James, a glass of wine in his hands as he breathes out in amusement.

"You got me socks. I wear em'." Tony comments with a small shrug.

"It was the only thing I can think of. Rhodey got Vision a sweater!" Sam says like he's a child ratting out a sibling, pointing at Vision who only smiles at the mention.

"That's the only normal people clothes I see him wear!" James defends, to which Vision promptly backs up.

"It's quite cozy. I like it." Vision calmly agrees.

"I think I still have the names from last year, i'll add Lexa's and go get it." Natasha promptly gets up, setting her drink down as she trails out of the room.

My eyes gravitate to Wanda, who sat silently by Vision, eyes never breaking away from the crackling fireplace as she held a bottle of beer in her hands. It were moments like those where i'd kill to have her abilities, or at least just know what was going through her head— if she was okay, if it was my fault. She had been silent ever since the night she threw me out of her room, barely bringing anything into conversations and mostly keeping to herself.

"Do all of you just... stay here over the holidays?" I ask, willing myself to fall into distraction as I tear my eyes away from Wanda.

"Some of us, yeah." Steve nods.

"I spend Christmas eve here, but I go to my sister's on the day itself." Sam chimes in.

"I usually throw a little get together on the eve here with Pepper, but this year i'd rather spend it at home." Tony hums, earning my eyes as I look to him curiously.

"Pepper?" I ask as Tony releases a small sigh.

"My... girlfriend? I don't know at this point. She's mad at me and we're not talking." He waves off dismissively, feigning nonchalance and keeping up his passive facade.

"Because you're a stubborn asshole." James comments jokingly as Steve snickers by my side.

"Hey— Mr. purity ring, you've got no right to laugh." Tony fires at him, earning a wave of laughter from Sam and James.

"Yeah, hundred year old virgin." Sam jokes amidst a chuckle, which sends Steve into a ramble of protests that was entirely amusing.

"You're a virgin?" I gasp, turning to Steve who looked genuinely pained by the topic of conversation.

"Why does that matter? It's personal!" He argues defensively, taking a begrudging sip from his beer as he practically sulks into his seat.

"I thought women would be like... throwing themselves at you." I chuckle.

"I just... haven't found the right one." He mumbles softly amidst scowl, crossing his arms over his chest as he hangs his head back in a groan.

"The offer still stands, I could put in a good word with Dr. Barrett." I nudge, sparking the interest of nearly everyone there— it even turns Wanda's head.

"You like the hot doctor?" Sam asks in excitement as Steve sends me a deadpanned look, to which I only raise my arms in surrender as he puffs out a tired breath.

"I don't... like her. I just think she's pretty." Steve timidly defends.

"Really? I didn't think you were into blondes." Tony chimes in, genuinely interested as he hums to himself.

"You know— I always thought you and Romanoff would end up together." Tony casually comments as Steve nearly chokes on his drink, a flush creeping beneath his cheeks as he looks at Tony with incredulous surprise.

"Me and Nat?" He asks.

"I see it. Yeah— it would make sense. You make a good team, there's sexual tension..." I trail off, watching Steve squirm in a panic right next to me.

"Sexual tension? Oh no. No. We're just really good friends." Steve dismisses a little too quickly, and almost as if on cue, Natasha walks in with a little metal bowl in her hands as all eyes snap to look at here.

"What did I miss?" She asks reluctantly, shifting uncomfortably under everyone's stares as I stifle a laugh.

"Nothing." I hum.

"Okay so I put your name in. Pass it around and take a paper." She hands it to Steve, who takes the bowl with a hilariously nervous smile as Natasha heads back to her seat.

Steve digs his hand into the bowl, the rustling of paper filling the air as he pulls out a rolled piece. I can tell he was actively trying to keep a straight face as he hands me the bowl, to which I place snugly on my lap. I grab a piece, passing it to Natasha who keeps it going while I carefully unfold my paper. I don't really know what I was hoping for, I had literally never gotten anyone a gift my entire life and to make matters even more complicated, when I unravel it and see the name scribbled down— I almost want to laugh because of course it's her.

Of course it's Wanda.

"Alright just toss the paper back in, remember the names you got and we're all set." Natasha casually instructs, moving the bowl into the coffee table as everyone returns their pieces.

"I'm going to get more drinks. Anyone want some?" Wanda speaks up for the first time that night, or at least the first time it wasn't a mumble or a hum or a small nod.

Most of them raise their hands, and Wanda makes a move to get up. Vision trails closely behind like it was second nature, a lingering hand on her lower back as they make their way to the fridge. My eyes follow sharply, I didn't even realize I was staring until Tony clears his throat, earning my attention as he raises his brows through his glasses.

"I think I see what we've missed." He comments casually as I look around the room, all of them either biting back a smile or had a knowing look plastered on their faces and maybe I was just drunk— drunk or tipsy or completely oblivious but it was like... everyone knew.

"That's— what? No." I shake my head in a subdued panic, my eyes widening as Sam chuckles softly.

"Yeah, it's kind of obvious." He hums and almost instinctively, I look to Natasha for confirmation. Taking a small sip of her drink, she offers me a subtle nod as I fall into a string of groans muffled by my face burying into my hands.

"It's okay. We've kind of... noticed for a while." Steve offers kindly, looking at me with genuine concern as I huff out a small sigh.

"Nothing ever— nothing happened there." I mumble, watching as they all exchange looks that dig my grave of shame even deeper.

"The tension is thicker than Cap's brain when a woman is flirting with him." Sam comments jokingly, earning a glare from Steve.

"She was always the first one to speak up when we'd have meetings about you. She seemed very... passionate about the matter. It looks like you've got competition, though." James comments, leaning back into his armchair with a drink in his hand as he nods over to where Vision and Wanda were conversing.

"Pretty good competition too, that's my boy." Tony chuckles, a mockingly proud smile on his alcohol covered lips as I sink into my seat.

"No. No competition, i'm not... playing." I admit, my vulnerabilities slipping smoother due to the array of drinks i've plowed through in one night.

"Why not? You've got a good shot." Sam questions.

"It's not like it would go anywhere. Look at them, look at him— they're practically meant to be. *Made* to be. I'm not going to mess that up, god knows i've fucked up enough people." I say passively, a small laugh falling from my lips to mask the way every word dug into my chest but I look at all of their faces and they're not buying it. All of them, even Tony was sunk into somber silence with Steve offering me a sad smile and a supportive hand.

"She cares about you." Natasha chimes in, looking at me with the same tenderness her eyes always had as I breathe a small sigh of defeat.

"I care about her too. That's why i'm here and not... there." I glance over at Wanda and Vision, talking as a small smile places itself onto her lips. The first time she had smiled the entire day and it was because of him.

"Well, that's depressing." Tony breathes out, breaking the silence as I finish what was left of my drink and make a move to get up.

"It is, which is why i'm calling it a night." I announce, followed by a sea of protests and attempted negotiations, with Sam even offering me socks for christmas to stay for another drink but I was too drained to keep up, despite having a bit of fun the baggage I was able to push aside for a few hours would still catch up.

"Thank you for the dinner, Tony. Thanks for a great night." I say to everyone, Tony raising his glass as Natasha rises from her seat.

"Come on, I'll walk you to the elevator." She smiles.

I lead the way out, Natasha keeping my pace as we tread down the short hallway and come to a stop by the elevators. She makes a move to press the button that leads me down, turning to look at me with a small smile that I return weakly.

"Thank you for coming. I know it's difficult, but i'm proud of you for being here." She says softly, pulling me into an embrace as I snake my arms around her waist.

"I'm trying." I sigh softly into her neck, feeling her hand rub gentle circles on my back.

"I know."

The doors ding open and Natasha pulls away, giving me a small nod as I step inside and let it take me to my floor. The moment I get to my room, I almost instantly strip of my dress, putting on a shirt and some sweats I was reusing before falling into my bed and sinking into the mattress with a small huff. Anxiety pooled in my throat, all because the night was actually good. It was maybe even great, which was a contrast to the dreaded memorial held this morning.

But good things don't last, no not for me. So my heart lodges in my throat and I lay there, I just lay there for hours in fear— in tension and stillness as I waited for whatever was coming to rip me apart. It was almost instinctive, like the way your muscles harden to brace for impact when you see something swinging your way. That's how I felt as I laid in bed, sprawled out like a starfish waiting for the next hit.

But the hit doesn't come as a hit, or a stab or a punch, it comes in the form of three steady knocks against my door at 2 in the morning. Knocks that tear me to my feet with curiosity, wondering who could ever be on the other side. When I swing it open, the last person I could have ever expected to see was Vision, standing in another one of his sweaters with a worried look in his eyes.

"What do you want?" I ask softly, peeking my head out and turning down both ends of the hallway to look for someone— something to explain why he was standing outside my door at such an hour.

"Talk to her, please." He practically pleads, his voice was steady but in little cracks, his desperation shone through.

"What?" I ask, opening the door completely as he stammers in place, looking lost on what to say as he finally looks back at me.

"I've tried everything but she's... inconsolable. She won't listen to me." He explains, struggling to keep his composure as I realize exactly who he's talking about.

"What the hell happened?" I ask sharply, taking a step closer to him as worry shines in his eyes.

"She's intoxicated. I've tried to slow her down to the best of my abilities but she wouldn't listen and now she's in her room and she's... she's not alright." He says in a soft sigh, the muffled rumble of ruckus seeping from Wanda's door echoing into the hallway as Vision subtly winces at the sound.

I look back at him despite my bones aching for me to bolt to her room, to burst through the door and pull her in. Even if it hurt— even if it burned, it didn't matter. The universe knew i'd set myself aflame a million times over just to have her close, but it isn't about me. I had no luxury to be selfish, not when it was her on the line. Anyone but her.

"She's just drunk, Vision. It'll wear off." I clear my throat, turning away and making a move to step back into my room when his voice rings in my ears.

"She's asking for you." He says it softly, a pained whisper that lingers in the air like a ghost filled with agony.

I stop in my tracks, snapping to look back at him as his face falls and eyes drop. He looks tortured, every muffled rumble digging into my chest and by the looks of it— his too. I was searching his face for something, for anything to use to keep me in place, to keep me from running but when all I find is desperation and complete and utter devotion— I brush past him in a split second decision that I was almost entirely sure i'd regret in the morning.

With Vision trailing closely behind, I push her door open to find a mess. A mess of clothes and torn drawers and in the middle of it all sat Wanda, hunched over with her head in her hands and mumbling words neither one of us could make out. It was like my head wasn't working, just my body as I waste no time in falling to my knees by her side, my hand lingering on the small of her back as the other rests gently on her knee.

"Hey— hey." I whisper, finally realizing she was sobbing into her palms as my heart shatters in place.

"I lost them— I lost everyone." She mumbles amidst her cries, refusing to tear her hands away from her face.

"No, you didn't. Come on, Wanda. Look at me." I gently coo, carefully wrapping a hand around her wrist to slowly pry her hands away from her head. Tear stained cheeks and puffy eyes look back at me, going over my face with a mixture of surprise and agony, like she couldn't tell if I was real or not.

"It's okay. I'm real." I offer her a small smile, repeating the words she once said to me weeks ago. I drop my hand from her wrist as she shakily reaches out to me, brows furrowed and dishevelled hair framing her pained face as her fingertips brush against my skin.

"I lost everyone." She whispers to me, tears trailing down her cheeks as I grab her hand and press it flush against my cheek, letting myself melt into her touch for the first time in a while.

"I'm going to lose you." She breathes shakily, her bottom lip quivering as she stifles soft sobs daring to escape.

Without another word, I wrap my arms around her and pull her into an embrace. I can feel her arms snake around my neck instantly, balling up the fabric of my shirt in her hands almost desperately as she trembles in my grasp. My eyes find Vision, standing by the door with the same look of despair swimming in his eyes. He offers me a small nod, almost as if to thank me before stepping out and closing the door.

"I can hear them— I can hear everything." Wanda stammers against my neck, her tears soaking my shirt as I pull away, keeping her face in my hands as she looks back at me with fear in her eyes.

"Just sing with me." I whisper, beginning to hum the same tune she did the night we first met at the facility. It takes her a while, frantic eyes going over my face before she joins in with reluctance. Her soft, shaky voice blending with mine until her heaving slows and she relaxes into my grasp.

"Let's get you on the bed, okay? We'll fix this in the morning." She gives me a hesitantly weak nod as I slip my hands into hers, ignoring the way it makes my chest cave in as I help her up to her feet and lead her to her bed.

I peel her covers off with a free hand, her tight grip never leaving mine even as she crawls onto the mattress, still a slight tremble in her bones as I take a seat on the edge by her side. I can feel something digging into the skin of my finger, the light of her bedside lamp being the only illumination in that cold, dark room as I look down to find a single ring on her finger.

The one she gave me in the park.

"Please don't leave again." She mumbles weakly, looking up at me with red, glossy eyes as my fingertips gently run over the metal of the ring.

I guess i've always known, maybe it only hurt less never to say it to myself. It was a scary thought, but it was glaring me in the face in big, bright lights that I couldn't run from anymore. It was in the way I craved for her touch, the way the most elegant symphonies could never best the sound of her voice, the way her eyes shone brighter than any star I could have ever hoped to see— it was in the way she makes the flowers bloom and nights feel warm— it was everything, and it's all her.

I'm in love with Wanda Maximoff.

Her and the way she smiles, her and the way she says my name, the way she looks at me like I could never be anything but good— the way she's always there, saving me even when i've pushed her a thousand miles away over and over. I can see the universe in her eyes, the good and the bad, the kind and the torturous, reality and a dream, all at once swimming in one person.

"Please... please stay." She begs shakily, and for once I don't think of the way the flames inch closer or the fear that came with the truth, I only care for her.

Just her.

So I let the night take me away and I crawl into her bed, laying right by her side, right under the covers that pool by our knees. She curls into me immediately, and I pull her in. I don't tell her about the horrors I come with, I don't walk away even when my heart was breaking, I pull her into me because for once, I don't want to let the world take away this one night. This one night for me, for my heart, for the girl in my arms.

She lays her head on my chest, an arm draped over my stomach as I lightly trace my fingers against her back. I can feel her breathing, the smell of her perfume and the alcohol hitting my nose in a wonderous bliss as both of us step into our bubble of silence. Neither one of us daring to move away in the fear of it shattering once more— because we were always so fragile. I wonder if we'd always be.

"Thank you." She whispers softly, her fingers fiddling with the fabric of my shirt as I hum lightly.

"For what?"

"For coming. For this." She breathes in defeat, moving to look up at me through loose strands of autumn hair that fell over her face.

"It's okay, maybe just try and drink less next time." I smile slightly, trying to lighten the air as I bring a hand up to tuck her hair behind her ears.

"I've sobered up." She defends weakly, eyes never leaving mine as I trace my finger down her jawline, lingering by her chin before falling back against the mattress.

"Why'd you drink so much anyway?" I question, watching reluctance paint over her features once again as she looks away and only nuzzles her head closer into the crook of my neck.

"It's stupid." She mumbles softly.

"It's not if it gets like, ten bottles down your throat." I chuckle lightly, my fingers caught up in her hair as I carefully ran them through the strands.

"You won't be here in the morning, will you?" She asks after a few moments, completely veering the topic as my heart sinks to my stomach.

"Wanda..." I trail off, my hands stilling in her hair as she flips over, half of her body laid on top of my as she rests her chin upon the back of her hand that was rested upon my ches.

She was so close that her breath hit my lips, half her face illuminated by the lamp as we laid there in the silence, marinating in the inevitable night that would have to dissipate into morning as time goes by.

"I just want to know. I want to know if you'll be gone so it... it'll hurt less." She says in a weak whisper, eyes filled with dread as I bring a gentle hand up to cup her cheek.

I press my thumb softly against her skin, trailing down to her lips where I let it linger. Touching her was a feeling I could not describe, magnificantly ethereal in the purest form. Her skin against mine hands, her breath in my palms felt like I had the whole world in my grasp and more, a million beautiful galaxies laid out into a single person in my arms.

She melts into me with such ease, her body fitting with mine in a graceful entanglement that's ravishing and brutish all at the same time. Desperate and elegant, like a harsh waves that reflect the light of the moon she lays there with her heartbeat thumping against my own, clutched onto me like tomorrow was merely a promise that would fall through the cracks and the world would break open and devour us whole.

I wonder if every person could find someone this way, someone who makes the most terrifying flames feel like fireworks that paint the sky, someone who makes their heart shatter and calm and swell with a single glance, someone who caresses them like a warm cup of coffee in the early hours of the morning, and fights like a warzone with no way of winning.

There have been so many depictions of love, in movies and books and art— but maybe that's why it's endless. Maybe thats why love is the muse that can never wither, that can never lose it's glowing beauty because in billions of lives on the earth that stands beneath us, the exact same amount of stories come into existence. Love is tailored and different, love is not always kind— but love is not always cruel. Love just is, it exists like the air and the water in the oceans, it exists like the beat of our hearts and the blood in our veins, it exists solely to exist.

With the force of nature and the strength of storms, with the beauty of sunsets and the solace of the moon love comes in a billion different ways— but it also ends in a billion different ways. But endings are another story, another inevitable chapter that would someday blow to light. Right now, with her lips pressed to the pad of my thumb I know, for the first time in a lifetime, exactly what love is. All of its mysteries, all of its twists and turns are answered by the way she looks back at me, green eyes that have captivated me the moment we met.

"You're in my head, aren't you?" I whisper with a small smile, gently swiping over her bottom lip as she tenderly pushes her face into my hand.

"I don't have to be." She breathes softly.

"You always are." I reply.

"So are you."

"I wish we could go back." I keep my eyes trained on her, an adoring smile on my lips as I take in every feature, every line and expression that could ever grace her face.

"Back to where?" She asks, tilting her head ever so slightly the way she does when she's curious.

"To you, standing outside my window in a ridiculously large jacket and a nervous smile." I laugh softly, peppering a smile on her face as she hums in delight.

"It was Steve's. He let me borrow it." She reveals.

"He knew?" I question in amusement, watching as she offers me a small nod.

"He'd leave the rooftop unlocked for me every night. He knew." She smiles, moving to lay her head back down on my chest as I gently run my fingers through her hair once more.

"I used to think that was complicated, if I only knew." I sigh, her hand coming up to catch mine as she intertwines our fingers.

"It doesn't have to be complicated. This— you don't have to go. You can stay here, with me in this bed." She says, bringing my hand to her face as she presses a soft, gentle kiss to the side of my thumb.

"You can stay until morning." She kisses once.

"Until evening." She kisses again.

"And all the days after. We can do this together." She looks up at me, this time being the one to cup my face in her hand.

"That sounds like a dream, Wanda." I smile tenderly, my heart thrashing against my chest as hope sparkles in her eyes.

"But dreams aren't real." I say softly, watching everything shatter before her eyes as she tenses against me.

"It could be. We could make it real. Why— why don't you want me?" She asks softly, pained and defeated as I bring a hand up to press over her own.

"I want you. I want you more than anything in the world and if I could just freeze time and stay here with you, I would. I would do it in a heartbeat." I plead, watching tears slowly begin to brim her eyes as she shakes her head.

"You don't need to freeze time to be with me. I'm here— can't you see? I'm here and I love you." She says and it rings in my ears like the echo of a tower bell. The world slows to a stop, my heart, my lungs, everything in me stilling in place as it's replaced by the sound of those three words falling from her lips over and over again.

"I'm in love with you too, why can't it be enough?" She says shakily, tears rolling down her cheeks as I gently run a hand over her healing wound, situated right by her scalp and once again, the scorching sensation burns my skin to the touch.

"It's always been enough. You've always been enough. Just lay with me, please." I plead, and despite the conflict in her eyes she complies. She lays her head down, pulling me so close like our bodies pressed against each other wouldn't suffice.

I start to hum her tune, an arm snug around her shoulders as I hold her in place. She doesn't say much else, she just lays in my arms until her body drifts in and out, relaxing into slumber before jolting back awake like she was in the middle of a battle with her own mind. I was in the middle of one too, fighting back tears that were thrashing to spill out, but she was already crying and I knew if I did too, I may never stop.

"I don't want to fall asleep. I don't want to lose you." She mumbles weakly, slurring her words against the crook of my neck as I plant a gentle kiss atop her head.

"You could never lose me." I whisper, and just like that she drifts off to sleep. Her body giving into the fight, and melting against my arms as tears fall silently from my eyes.

She was tired enough not to wake from the way my chest would jump as I stifled sobs, as I get away with little sniffles and wiping at my eyes praying for the tears to cease. I never close my eyes, never let sleep pull me in as I listened to the sound of her breathing until the dark sky slowly turns light and i'm begging to the high heavens for time to slow.

But it doesn't.

It doesn't and the sun shines through the curtains, pooling into the floor like a puddle of gold that broke my heart. I take one more look at Wanda, still fast asleep in my arms as I bask in her beauty for a little while longer. When I look at her, I almost want to hate the world again for what it's done. I want to tear apart the clouds, to salt the earth I stood on, to curse the waters and fight the tides for every crack it has ever bore into her heart. I want to hate the world for all the pain it's given her, and I do. I hate every single thing that made her cry, every moment, every memory, every person.

That's why I hate myself so much, because I know what happens next. I know what happens as I slowly peel her arms off of me, as I slip out of bed undetected, as I stood by her doorway, watching her chest rise and fall under the covers with her eyes peacefully shut. A small, bitter smile crawls onto my lips, my hand on the knob and a foot out the door as I whisper;

"I love you too."

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