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Salzburg, Austria
2008

Goodbyes are something you can never prepare for.

Sure, you could write it down on paper, memorize a speech in your head, envision the aftermath and say you're going to be alright but when you're standing there, looking them in the eyes, watching their heart shatter from your words— watching them walk away, it hits harder than any punch you could ever prepare for.

Your body is tense and you tell yourself you're expecting the impact, that it won't hurt as much but it does, maybe a million times worse than the way it did in your head. The words taste sour on your tongue, your hands are shaky and your knees go weak like you've just been pushed onto a stage before thousands of people with your heart in your throat and your words amiss.

It tears you apart differently, when the goodbye isn't by choice too. When it's by fate, brought upon by circumstances out of your control. It's like putting down a book you've been reading for days, and knowing you can never pick it up again. Like waking up in the middle of a deep slumber and never slipping back in, like a glass half empty and a movie half seen. It's incomplete, uneasy, unsettling— the finality of the moment, the uncertainty is torturous.

"What did you do?" Our father shakily breathes, standing with a hand in Lara's, who was already in tears. I know she hated the dark, she hated the cold and in that room— surrounded by dim, swinging ceiling lights and big men with guns, it was a nightmare.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." My lips tremble profusely, heart sinking to my gut as he trails his eyes over me. I can see him slowly understanding what i've done, connecting the dots in his eyes as they flood with horror.

"No. No— no! No, Lexa! Do you hear me? No!" He screams, desperation dripping from his lips as my tears trace down my cheeks.

"It's the only way. You know it is." I weakly reply as Lara shakes off his grip, bolting to me and wrapping her arms around my torso so tightly, like i'd turn to ash and disappear into the air if she let go for even a split second.

Her hands ball up the fabric of my shirt, trembling as her face pressed into my stomach. I don't understand how i'm supposed to walk away when she's holding me like this— how I'm supposed to say goodbye to somebody I thought would forever be by my side. She was so afraid, I can feel her shaky breaths, her stifled sobs, the way her tears soak into my clothes as mine pepper my face. It was the cruelest form of torture I could ever endure.

"Lexa— please don't go. Please— Please, take it back." Lara croaks out against me, her staggered breaths shaking us in place as I make a move to get on my knees, lining up our faces as I cup her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry. I have to do this." I whisper, wiping her stream of tears with the pad of my thumb as she shakes her head incessantly.

"You don't, you don't have to go. You can come home with us. I— I can talk to them. Maybe they'll listen to me—" She spews frantically, in fragments just within my grasp as I bite back a sob.

I wanted to pick up the pieces with my own hands, to hold her in my arms and freeze time— to stay there with her forever. The fear in her eyes, the despair, the longing was the most agonizing thing I had ever seen. Her and her small frame, little hands clinging onto my wrists like I was her last lifeline and knowing i'd have to walk away.

"You're going to be okay. Just listen to me— you're going to be okay. Dad is going to take care of you, it'll be okay." I halfheartedly try to ease her pain, despite feeling its intensity myself. I barely believed in my own words— but I just wanted to give her something, anything to make it hurt less.

"No! No— you take care of me. How can I— how am I going to do this? Please don't do this." She begs, throwing herself against me as she hooks her arms behind my neck. She was clawing at my back, never getting close enough even when we were completely melted into each other.

"Never more than six minutes." I croak out, holding her tightly in place as I bury my face into her frail shoulder.

"No. No please." She pleads shakily.

"You always forget and if you do, the macaroni gets soggy. Never more than six minutes." I manage to speak through my tears, hearing the doors behind me begin to creak open. I hold her closer, tighter and she does the same.

"No soda after dinner. You can't sleep if you have too much sugar." I shakily whisper as the heavy footsteps begin to draw closer.

"You're not taking my daughter!" I can hear our father screaming, I can hear the ruckus, the sound of guns drawing and his steps stilling as panic completely floods his features. Lara makes a move to pull away, trembling and afraid but I catch her face before she could turn, keeping her eyes on me.

"Two clicks for the stove. Hot water before cold in the shower or else it won't work." She's sobbing in my grasp, shaking her head and wiring her eyes like my words were only digging daggers into her chest as I kept my firm grip.

"Look at me. Look at me." I whisper amidst staggered breaths, my face, neck and shirt soaked with our tears as she opens her eyes slowly, fearfully as her bottom lip quaked in pain.

"Don't ever stop drawing. It's going to be okay." I let her face go, gently pressing the tip of my finger upon her chest to trace the outline of a flower right above her heart.

"No, Lexa please— please." She was so desperate, nothing but suffering in her eyes as I feel large hands wrap around my arms.

Lara screams at the top of her lungs, grabbing onto my waist as I'm being dragged away. A man steps in behind her, prying her off as she falls to the ground, the last sight I have of her was in that yellow sundress, on her knees in devastation as the door slams shut and her muffled cries bleed through the cracks. Even when i'm taken far enough, it was like her cries crawled up the walls and followed, echoes in my ears hauntingly for days— for weeks, months... years.

It never stops.

I keep waiting for it to quiet down, but the moment i'm alone and I close my eyes I can feel her balling up my shirt, I can feel her arms wrapped around me for dear life, I can feel her tears soaking my clothes— her cries painting the walls with the intensity of her screams as she watched me disappear through that door.

Most times when I sleep, I'd dream of her. I'd dream that the door never opened and the footsteps never came, that we stayed that way forever as time withered everything around us. Everything but us. Just in each other's arms, keeping the promise we engraved into our hearts in the corner of that little dark room in Seattle, our pinkies interlocked and never broke even when the monsters came banging at our door— it'd be okay.

It'd be okay, because we had each other.

But we didn't anymore. I'd wake up and be alone, a different room every week but the same prison I threw myself into. Hotel rooms never had bars on the windows, but I felt trapped all the same. Trapped, alone, marinating in the blame, the guilt and the shame and hoping to the stars that somewhere out there was a better life for Lara because it was all I had. It was all I had to hold onto.

And I thought that for once, I did the right thing.

New York, U.S.A.
2015

"Let me get this straight, you left?" Natasha asks, sitting by the end of her bed with her back pressed against the headboard and an open book in her lap.

"Well, yeah." I nod, falling back into her bed with a heavy sigh as Natasha sets her book down by her nightstand.

Departing from Wanda's room, I didn't go straight to mine. I found myself standing outside Natasha's door, my heart in my hands and my bones aching for somebody to make the feeling in my chest go away. I was so confused, so afraid— so hurt because of what i've done and the moment Natasha opened her door, her reading glasses perched on her nose and room smelling like coffee, she saw the desperation on my face instantly.

"Why?" She asks softly, taking off her glasses and setting them down by her book as I wallowed in uneasy despair by the foot of her bed.

"She told me she loved me." I reveal softly, running my hands down my face in a muffled groan.

"You left because... she loves you?" Natasha trails slowly, the confusion prominent in her words as my arms slump back against her mattress.

"No— yes? I don't know." I stammer frustratedly, staring up at the ceiling as my emotions begin to engulf me.

"Do you love her?" Natasha asks and I turn my head to meet her curious eyes, her now holding a cup of coffee as she waits for a reply.

"Yes." I mumble softly.

"So what's the problem?" Natasha looks visibly confused, concerned even as I scramble to sit up, crossing my legs over each other as I completely turn to face her.

"The problem is i'm not okay, Nat. I love her and she loves me but if there's one thing these past few months has proven to me is that love isn't enough." I explain tiredly.

"I love Lara and look where she is. This all happened because I made a choice when I wasn't okay— and i'm not okay now. I still blame myself. I still carry around all of this— this guilt, this baggage and I can't stay with her when i'm like this. It'll hurt her." I reason, feeling my heart sink with every word.

"It's already hurting her, and you." Natasha points out cautiously.

"It'll be worse if i'm selfish now. I want to... I want to get better. I want to be better before I do this, before I can tell her I love her without feeling like i'm giving her a death sentence." I reply, running a shaky hand through my hair as Natasha scoots closer to me.

"Then tell her that." She places a hand upon my knee, attempting to soothe me amidst all of my visible conflict.

"She'll wait." I sigh, shaking my head as I wire my eyes shut.

"Isn't that a good thing?" Natasha questions, her voice was soft and rounded and tender— and I was breaking apart.

"It's not, because I don't know if i'll ever get better. I can learn to forgive myself someday— but if she gets hurt, because of me— I don't know how i'll ever live with myself." I say weakly, feeling Natasha's prominent stare linger on my face despite my eyes staying shut.

"I'm saying this as a friend, because I care about both of you very deeply." Natasha begins, retracting her hand from my knee as I slowly open my eyes to look at her.

"You're not protecting her." Natasha sighs.

"What?"

"You're protecting you. I get it— every person you've cared about has had to stare death and destruction in the face at least once and she will. She's part of the team, Lexa. With or without you, danger will always linger." Natasha speaks gently, not a hint of malice or hostility in her soft tone.

"And if you can't handle that, if you can't handle the blame that comes with admitting your feelings and letting this happen— then tell her the truth. Tell yourself the truth. Because this has nothing to do with Wanda and everything to do with you." She hums softly, almost somberly as she offers me a tight lipped smile.

I take a moment to myself, lingering in the silence of my thoughts as I take in her words. There was a part of me that wanted to argue, to tell her it was for Wanda— that it wasn't about me. My defenses were itching to shoot up immediately, my bones aching to walk out the door and drown the conversation out like it never happened but Natasha was sitting there, nothing but sincerity and kindness in her tone that I have to step back and think that maybe, just maybe, she's right.

"What should I do?" I finally manage to speak, watching as Natasha releases a soft sigh.

"I can't tell you what to do. All I know is that— you have time. You have the certainty of existence, not all of us do. Not all of us get that opportunity and I know that if I had what you have, i'd want to spend every waking moment with the people I love." She replies tenderly.

"Lexa, bad things are always going to happen. If they didn't— then the team wouldn't exist. Danger is inescapable, but regret isn't. The person you love is just a few steps away, do you really want to let that go to waste?" She asks softly, nodding over to her door as I try to swallow a lump in my throat.

"You're telling me to go for it, aren't you?" I huff, looking back at Natasha as she tries to bite back a smile.

"I'm telling you to follow your heart." She hums as I scramble to crawl off her bed with a small sigh.

"That's so cheesy, you do hear yourself right?" I tease, getting to my feet as Natasha groans lightly.

"You tell anyone I said that and i'll kill you." She playfully warns, swiping her glasses from the nightstand as she shook her head.

"I'd like to see you try. No, seriously— I would pay to see that." I chuckle, turning to head for the door.

"I'd find a way. Now go, stop stalling." She waves me off as I roll my eyes, swinging her door open and stepping out as my heart thrashes in place.

Every step felt spiralling, like my bones were daring to rip through my skin with all the nerves coursing through me. I wasn't sure what to do — what to say, if I was even doing the right thing but Natasha's words stuck to me, engulfed me like I was slowly sinking into the truth of why I kept running. I didn't exactly have a solid plan, and maybe i'd fuck it up more than i'd like to admit but as I stood outside Wanda's door once again, all I knew was that I wanted to try.

I spent a good chunk of my life trying to pay for the sins of everyone around me by making my own, building my personal suffering thinking it was what I deserved. I never even knew what tenderness, what love and happiness could feel like until she was in my arms. I didn't understand how something could ever feel so powerful— and so beautiful all at once.

And maybe that's what scared me the most.

Admitting this, telling her how I felt— pulling her in and letting everything unfold also meant I was solidifying that I have something good. That I have something more to lose, and that was terrifying. The last I had of it, was thinking I still had Lara to come back to. When that was shattered, so was I, in the most excruciating way possible but when the sun rose and I took a look at a sleeping Wanda, buried underneath the covers I realized walking away was equally as painful.

So I knock.

I knock three times, gently turn the knob and I step inside. Wanda was in the middle of making her bed, the clutter on her floors from the night before mostly been tucked into the drawers that were perfectly settled against the wall once more. She doesn't notice me instantly, her back turned to me as she carefully presses the wrinkles out of her covers. I close the door behind me, the click of it shutting finally gaining her attention as she spins around, a ghost of shock on her features that instantly calm when she realizes it's me.

"Oh... hey." She hums, clearing her throat as she awkwardly tends back to making her bed.

"Hi." I say, biting back a smile at the evident pout on her lips that I most definitely should not find adorable— but when have I ever done things I should?

"About last night..." I trail off, watching as she freezes in place and turns to me almost nervously.

"You remember what happened?" I raise a brow, watching as her eyes shift to look at anything but me.

"Kind of." She replies shortly.

"Look— whatever I said last night... could we just forget it? I was really drunk and... upset and I was probably not making sense." She stammers anxiously, nearly tripping over her own words as her fingers began to fiddle with the only ring on her hand.

"Which part do you want me to forget? The part where you said you love me or the part where you said you're *in* love with me?" I question, doing my best to hide my amusement at the horror plastering across her features.

"Oh god, I wasn't dreaming." She mumbles softly to herself.

"Unless we had the exact same one, i'd say it was pretty real." I reply, taking a few steps back to lean against her door as she runs a frustrated hand through her autumn hair.

"I can explain." She instantly spews, looking back at me frantically as I only offer her a small shrug, motioning for her to continue.

"I was drunk." She settles quickly, looking back at me in a panic as amusement sweeps over my features.

"So are you going to take it back?" I question as Wanda rolls her eyes, huffing out a tired breath as she turns on her heel to continue fixing her bed.

"That doesn't matter. You still left anyway." She mumbles lowly, moving around the bed to straighten her pillows.

"Well i'm here now, aren't I?" I question, crossing my arms over my chest as I watch her continue to work.

"That doesn't count." She replies, her frustration slowly bleeding through her words as she looks up at me in irritation.

"Why doesn't it?"

"Because you still left."

"But i'm here."

"That's not the point."

"Then what is?" I fire back, finally getting her to stop in her tracks amidst her restless pacing to snap towards me, looking at me like she couldn't believe I was even asking that.

"Are you serious?" She asks sharply, but I only offer a casual shrug that merely fuels her fire.

"You're unbelievable." She scoffs, shaking her head as she continues to pick up the trinkets and clothes that remained on her floor from the previous night.

"How am I unbelievable? I'm just asking a question." I chuckle softly as she begrudgingly stuffs the clothes into her drawer like she had a personal vendetta against it.

"You ask the *dumbest* questions, honestly." She groans, little huffs falling from her lips as she continues shoving messily folded shirts into her drawer.

"How is that dumb?" I exclaim in disbelief, pushing myself off of her door and going to pick up the last of the clutter on the ground.

"Do I need to say it? You're going to make me spell it out for you? Wasn't last night humiliating enough for me?" She spews, harshly grabbing the items I so carefully handed to her and shoving them into the drawers as well without a single care in the world.

"I don't get why you're so mad. I came back, didn't I?" I argue, standing just a few steps behind her as she slams the drawer shut and turns to me.

"I just told you i'm in love with you and you still left! You told me you didn't want anything to do with me and yet you spend all your time with that stupid doctor who gives you books and laughs at your jokes like it's actually funny. It's not even that funny!" She snaps, getting everything out in a single breath as I stood dumbfounded by her revelation.

Okay, now I understand why she called me dumb.

"Now you're here, smiling at me all smug like you didn't just break my heart again! Vision doesn't break my heart— he's always there for me, he's kind and patient and *smart* and he doesn't make me jump through hoops just to feel important but for some reason you're still the first person I look for when I walk into a room." She continues, her volume increasing with every word as I sunk into silence at her outburst.

"And I hate it. I hate that you're stubborn and that you feel the need to carry the weight of the world, I hate that you keep pushing me away even when i've made it really, stupidly clear that i'm ready to go through hell and back with you and I hate that I still want to! So just— do me a favor and don't come back. If you walk out that door just don't come back and let me go because I don't want to get stuck in this." She falls into a plea, chest heaving and eyes desperate as I still stood speechless before her.

"So? Say something!" She exclaims desperately, expectant eyes looking back at me as I do the one and only thing that pops into my head at that moment.

I hook a hand around the back of her neck and I pull her in.

Remember how I said movies were never accurate? Okay so maybe I wasn't *completely* right. Those scenes where the couples kiss for the first time and their surroundings blur and time slows down and everything feels absolutely, completely flawless for a single moment — it happens. Only this time, no special effects and pretty sunsets or fireworks paiting the sky. Just me, holding her in place as our lips crash into each other, my eyes wired shut and hers dead open as she freezes for a split second and in that same second I begin to fear maybe i've done the wrong thing.

Until she kisses me back.

Until it sinks in to her— and admittedly, me too, that it was actually happening and her arms snake around my neck and my hands find their way down to her waist. Each of us pulling the other in like close is never close enough, completely breaking a barrier that we can never uncross. Maybe neither of us wanted to, maybe we were both completely and utterly terrified— I know I am but the feeling of her lips on mine, her taste on my tongue, her breath on my lips was a completely different sensation I never knew could exist in such a bleak world.

Her fingertips like the rays of the sun, melting against my skin with the roughness of her nails digging in. She kisses me with such hunger — such fervor, pulling me in with every purse of her lips and swipe of her tongue that I never knew I could ever feel so wanted— so complete, so *free.* I could kiss her forever, stay there with my hands digging into her waist and her fingers in my hair, holding her so close I felt like we shared every breath. It was divine, as heavenly as all of the choirs above singing just for me.

"What?" I ask softly, breathless as we pull away.

Our eyes never break from the contact, she's looking at me like she can't believe i'm real— like she's trying to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

"You just... kissed me." She breathes, mostly talking to herself than anyone else as a small smile crawls onto my lips.

"I risked it." I shrug slightly, an airy chuckle falling from my lips as I take a small step back to give a still frozen Wanda some space.

"*You* kissed *me*" She mumbles again, bringing her hand up to gently linger upon her lips as her eyes widen like it had just sunk in at that very moment.

"I did. Yeah." I bite back a smile as Wanda glances down at her fingertips, then back at me as she promptly takes another step forward to pull me in and connect our lips once more.

Taking me by surprise, I barely have enough time to kiss her back before she pulls away with a genuine smile etched on her plump lips. Her hands lingered by my chest, balling up the fabric of my shirt until she realizes she was still holding on and promptly lets go, awkwardly straightening the wrinkles she had caused before stepping back once again.

"What was that for?" I ask, amusement shining through my smile as she lightly rolls her bottom lip in between her teeth, shrugging slightly.

"I wanted to risk it too. Again— I mean." She replies nervously, unable to fight the smile on her face as I slowly nod.

"Good. That's... established." I clear my throat, both of us standing awkwardly at arm's reach as the thickening silence kicks in.

"Yes, it is." She nods a little too quickly, visibly slowing herself down as she slowly begins to twist the ring on her finger.

Right as I'm about to say something, Wanda's door bursts open and Natasha strides in with urgency, head scanning the room until she finds me and freezes for a split second. Our eyes meet and I can tell by the look on her face that something is wrong, which almost instantly sinks my heart to my gut with panic.

"It's Lara. She's not waking up." Natasha says, actively trying to keep her cool as her words float through the air and hit my ears.

Before I could even truly understand, my body had seemed to take initiative and I found my feet propelling me to the door, bolting out with urgency as I hook my hands by Wanda's doorframe, quickly swinging my upper body back inside to look back at a severely concerned Wanda, dumbfounded in the same spot.

"I'll come back for that." I nod to her ring, barely giving her a chance to respond before I'm catching up to Nat who was already a good distance down the corridor.

"What happened?" I instantly ask Natasha, matching her brisk pace as we finally get to the elevators.

"She's been refusing to eat or drink anything since she got here. Doctors suspect it's dehydration. She's in and out, but she's been knocked out for the past six hours." Natasha explains quickly as we step into the elevator, my head snapping to her in complete and utter shock.

"Six hours? And nobody thought to inform me earlier? Jesus— fuck!" I exclaim under my breath, waiting impatiently as I stared at the screen, hoping for the numbers to go faster.

"Doctors have been trying to get her sedated enough to open an IV line but she's been really hostile." Natasha tries to explain further, but her words only spike my anger.

"So they just let her starve? That's it? She's too difficult so stop trying? How long have you known?" I ask, turning hastily to face Natasha who releases a soft sigh.

"Every time I ask, they assure me they have it under control. I didn't know it was this bad, Lexa." She reasons right as the doors ding open. I waste no time in stepping out, Natasha trailing closely behind as she tries to match my speed.

"You know that we feel everything?" I say sharply, nearing the guarded doors as Natasha's eyes turn to me.

"We heal quick but we can feel every bit of the pain just the same. Did they think that just because she couldn't die, it'd be fine?" I seethe, pushing past the double doors as all eyes snap to us.

"Where is she?" I exclaim sternly, my voice thundering through the room as one of the doors open and Jess rushes out, donning the same lab coat and glasses she wore almost every day.

"Follow me." She motions quickly.

Natasha and I promptly trail after her as she leads us into a shorter corridor, then into a room that looked a lot like a state of the art operating room with Lara laying on a bed, right in the middle with thick metal restraints on her wrists, upper arms, thighs and ankles. A tube was connected into the vein on her forearm, leading all the way to a bag that hung from a steel pole a few feet taller than the bed.

"What is this? What the fuck happened?" I snap to Jess, approaching the bed instantly as my eyes trail over Lara's features.

God, I should have noticed yesterday. I thought it was the stress— I didn't realize until she was close enough to touch just how sunken her cheeks looked and how dark the circles around her eyes had gotten. She looked like she had the life drained out of her, laying there amidst a sea of beeping machines as I try to make sense of yet another obstacle staring me in the face.

"We're feeding her body the nutrition its been missing through the IV." Jess tries to explain, standing by Natasha near the doorway with a pad in her grasp.

"Why did you let it get this bad, Jess?" I whisper flatly, never tearing my eyes away from a still unconscious Lara.

"I didn't know—"

"Bullshit you didn't know! You monitor her every day and you're telling me you had no idea she was starving? She was dehydrated? Are you that fucking oblivious that you can't do your job right?" I snap, turning to face her with a sharp glare that she dejects by looking away.

"She's going to be alright, Lexa." Natasha tries to ease the heavy atmosphere, taking a cautious step towards me as I look at her in disbelief.

"Look at her, Nat! She's chained up and she practically looks dead! What the fuck is this?" My frustrations continue to bleed as my voice gets louder, anger seeping through every word as Natasha only releases a defeated breath.

"You have to understand that it was extremely dangerous to just send someone into her cell when she's actively hostile—" Jess begins.

"Then send me! Fucking send me— it doesn't take a brainiac to figure that shit out!" I cut her off, my anger only fuelled by the complete disbelief at the entire situation. It could have been so easily prevented— Lara didn't have to be in pain. That's what made my blood boil.

"You know what, I don't trust any of you. From now on, i'll be down here every fucking day. Every night as well if I have to." I chuckle bitterly, shaking my head as Jess sighs.

"Lexa, come on." She attempts to reason, but I'm already waving her off before she could continue.

"No, don't pull that shit with me. She's my sister! At the end of the fucking day, she'll always be my responsibility. You may all see her as some horrific monster, but she's my flesh and blood and as hard as it is to comprehend, I do fucking love her." I seethe, watching the two of them sink into silence.

"Anything like this happens again and I'll personally make sure somebody pays for it." I say flatly through gritted teeth, walking across the room and hastily grabbing a stool to place by Lara's bedside.

"You should go." Natasha says to Jess as I rest my elbows upon the edge of Lara's bed, resting my face into the palm of my hands as I try to wither the rising anger in my chest.

"Both of you should go." I say softly, muffled against my hands.

"What?" Natasha reiterates like she was unsure if she heard me right, her sharp stare piercing through me without me having to even look her way.

"I really want to be alone, Nat." I sigh, pulling away from my hands and looking over my shoulder at the two of them.

"Oh... Okay. I'll be right outside if you need anything." Natasha says, walking over to me and placing a gentle hand on my shoulder.

I linger my fingers upon hers for a fleeting moment, barely even touching before my arm falls back to my lap and she walks away, closely followed by Jess who only shoots me an apologetic look before stepping out as well. The more I think about everything, the angrier I become because it was such an unnecessary obstacle. If somebody had just cared enough to tell me— to get off their asses and just said a word then I would have done anything and everything to prevent it from getting here.

Every time I offer to come see her, i'm met with a pyramid of excuses that always trail back to my presence being disruptive to the process and yet here we are, my sister unconscious, starved and dehydrated because a bunch of pricks didn't care enough to try harder. It was frustrating having to hold myself back from quite literally bashing their head in.

I don't know how long I sat there, my back aching from the steel chair I hadn't moved from in hours. Even when doctors would come in to check on her, I would never leave her side. I'd watch helplessly, worry lingering in every crevice of my entirety. Even when I knew she couldn't perish, it didn't mean she wasn't in pain. I wanted nothing more than for her to just open her eyes, even if all she'd ever do is spite me and despise me, at least she'd be conscious while doing so.

"How are you doing?" Jess softly asks from the doorway, the caution in her voice was still so evident as I sat in the same spot, barely gracing her with my eyes.

"I'm not the one you should be concerned about." I mumble softly, turning back to Lara.

"Look, I made a bad call. I'm sorry. I just... didn't want to burden you even more with everything that you've been dealing with this week —" She attempts, but it's like every word that comes from her lips only adds fuel to the fire.

"Don't you ever, for a second, imply that Lara is a burden. She's a pain in my ass, yes, but she's never a burden." I cut her off instantly, turning to meet her defeated eyes.

"I'm sorry." She mumbles softly.

"Look, I get it. I see the picture it paints in your heads. She's a prisoner, a murderer— in your eyes. I don't blame any of you for the reluctance, but she is always going to be my sister. That will always come first to me, so if you can't provide her the proper care then at least let me. I'd gladly do it and *never* think twice." I give in, my tone calming into a somber hum as Jess stands just a few feet away, looking just as disheartened as she did hours ago.

"I'm so sorry, Lexa." Jess sighs, looking utterly destroyed.

"You can stop apologizing now." I reply with a dismissive shake of the head, but she still looks back at me with melancholy painted deeply in her expression.

"But I am, I'm sorry for everything." She insists somberly.

Before I could properly respond, I hear gasps coming from behind me. Once my brain registers Lara's breaths, I shoot up out of my seat and turn to her immediately. Her eyes were wide open, almost puzzled as she thrashed within her restraints. Her gaze darts everywhere in a frantic rush, landing on me as her brows furrow and mouth hangs agape like she couldn't quite understand how I could be standing right there.

"Lexa?" She croaks out and my heart nearly shatters right then and there just by the way she said it.

The fear in her eyes, the complete vulnerability— she looked just like a kid again. Like the girl who'd crawl trembling into my arms when she couldn't sleep, begging me never to leave, looking at me with so much worry and unease. It was the first time I ever saw a part of her I could recognize, a glimpse of the girl I left behind.

Then just like that, just as she realizes where she is, just as the doctors rush in— I watch it completely disappear. I watch the girl I recognize fade into a dark spiral, spinning farther and farther away until she's gone again.

"What did you do to me?" She seethes as doctors begin to surround her, becoming more and more frantic with every passing second.

"I didn't do this. Just calm down, they're going to need to do some tests—" I try to reason despite having to step away, trying to see over all the people surrounding her.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I can hear her thrashing, the metal shaking under her jolting movements as I feel a hand wrap around my wrist, gently guiding me out the door.

"Come on, they'll take care of her. You can come back in a few minutes." Jess coos and in defeat, I follow her out to the corridor, merely having to watch through the window as the muffled sounds of Lara's curses seep through the cracks of the door.

"Tell them not to sedate her. Don't sedate her." I direct in a panic, snapping to look at Jess.

"They won't. They won't. They're just testing her responses, if there's any damage— just to be sure." She reassures, motioning for me to look as I comply.

A few minutes pass and the her muffled grunts subside. The doctors all head out, whispering amongst themselves as I plow through, practically bolting into the room to find Lara staring silently at the ceiling. A stoic look was painted onto her face as I approach, Jess loosely trailing behind to keep a good distance between us as I reach Lara's bed.

"What did they do? What did they give her?" I turn to Jess with worry dripping from my tone.

"They didn't give her anything." She replies instantly as I look back at Lara, who had zero acknowledgement for my presence once again.

"What happened?" Lara mumbles softly after a few minutes, her voice barely audible— like speaking was foreign and she was uncertain to even open her mouth.

"Dehydration and well, starvation. You weren't eating." I sigh, falling back onto the stool as Lara keeps her eyes unwavering from the lights up above.

"Why weren't you eating?" I huff in frustration, running a hand down my face as Lara turns to meet my gaze.

"Look at me. Look where you put me, do you really think i'd have an appetite?" She snaps sharply, wincing in pain when she tries to move against her restraints.

"Can you stop moving? God, this is so stupid— even for you. So what was your plan? You'd just keep passing out? Was that it?" I fire back, utterly annoyed and quite frankly, without patience for her bullshit after everything that had just happened.

"Better than being awake with you." She seethes.

"I thought you wanted revenge? I thought you wanted to make me pay? How are you going to do that if you're unconscious? Jesus, Lara. Use your head." I scoff, watching as offense floods her expression.

"You're an asshole." She spits.

"And you're an idiot! You pull this shit again and i'll personally come into your cell and shove food down your throat. You can hate me all you want, but don't destroy yourself because of your pride." I scold through gritted teeth, taking her by surprise with my anger.

"You come near me and i'll—"

"You'll what? Kill me? Please, be my guest. I'd love nothing more. I'm not joking around, Lara. Now stop moving, you're going to hurt yourself." I instruct coldly, placing my arms upon the edge of her bed to rest my aching head when she promptly jolts in place, moving the whole bed that purposely makes me slip and nearly tumble to the floor.

"What the fuck?" I groan, scooting closer as I shoot her a glare before reclaiming my position.

Then she does it again.

"Stop it!" I snap but she only glares my way and jolts again, all without breaking eye contact.

"Stop." I warn flatly, grabbing the base of her bed to keep it from moving further away.

"No." She replies smugly, nudging the bed again without missing a beat as I hold it in place.

"Stop."

"No."

"I swear—" She nudges.

"Lara!" I exclaim, getting increasingly annoyed by the second but it only seemed to be fuelling her arrogance.

"What?" She challenges, an irritating smirk slowly crawling onto her lips as I send her daggers through my glare.

"Stop it." I warn once again, but just as usual— she doesn't listen.

She nudges the bed again, even harder this time, hard enough to slip my grasp and nearly knock the surrounding machines over as I'm sent to the ground, landing on my knees with a heavy thud. I look back at Lara, seeing the glint of amusement in her eyes as she tries to hold back a mocking laugh.

"I hate you." I mumble in a soft groan, scrambling to my feet as she beams a bright, sarcastic smile.

"I hate you more."

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