

Wanda was definitely right.

I don't think I've ever been in a car with just Natasha—except for that one time she practically stole a van to pretend to transport me to prison or something, but being in a normal car was an entirely different experience. I know Natasha is a pretty serious person, she's very strong-willed, firm, confident and a lot would agree when I say she's terrifying.

But Natasha is many other things. Natasha, aside from being what I could comfortably say the world's best assassin, also loves to dance. Natasha makes amazing lasagna, Natasha loves to paint and read and apparently, she also has a variety of curated playlists on her phone that she blasts the moment the car engine sputters alive. So in other words, I had to sit through a handful of Ariana Grande songs and pretend like Natasha wasn't dying to sing along to Dangerous Woman—but was just too shy to do it in front of me. When we finally pull into a spot, she shuts the stereo down and collects herself, with me just staring at her in amusement because Natasha in her black leather jacket and boots—totally did not strike me as an Ariana Grande fan.

"What?" She asks a little too defensively, shutting the car down as I shake my head.

"Nothing. Nothing." I mumble, stifling a laugh as we both step out of the car and I go to grab the bags sitting in the back seat.

"Does she know I'm coming?" I ask, shutting the car door and joining Natasha on the sidewalk as she clicks the car locked.

"No, I haven't said anything but she asks about you every time I'm over—or every time I call. She'll never admit it, though." Natasha smiles, leading the way into the building as I trail closely behind holding the bags.

"Of course she wouldn't. I miss her, but I'll never admit it to her either." I chuckle, jogging up the stairs as we finally get to the door, Natasha fishing out her keys and clicking the lock open.

She enters first, while I head right for the kitchen with a beaming smile on my face. It's only been a few weeks since I've been in the apartment, almost a month but it feels so far away. I couldn't deny the warmth in my chest just standing there again, under the dim kitchen light with countless nights spent sitting on these counters with a bowl of whatever I could forage from the fridge.

Being here had a sense of home in it, having been the only place I've ever been with the least amount of ghastly memories. It didn't feel tainted here, not as much as every other place. When I was standing in this apartment, I remember the sound of records playing, the feel of books in my hands, the sound of the television running in the background and Martina.

Martina, who was already yapping on in the living room to Natasha. Martina, who had absolutely no idea I was in the kitchen. I hadn't seen her since I le, and so much has changed since then. I couldn't deny my excitement, the utter delight swimming in my chest as I carefully head to the doorway, leaning against the frame and watching as Martina, who had her back turned to me, scavenged through the bag of takeout Natasha had picked up on the way here.

I also had a few presents for her, but she also didn't know that yet.

"Merry fucking Christmas, you got the fancy shit!" She exclaims happily, fishing out the boxes of food and taying it out on the coffee table as Natasha's amused eyes meet mine.

"I was afraid you'd kick us out if we didn't." I speak up, watching her movements still to a freeze as she slowly turns to face me. Eyes wide and mouth slightly agape, I look at her a beaming smile as I walk into the living room.

"You're fucking kidding me." She breaks out into a grin, running over to tackle me into a hug that knocks the wind out of my lungs.

"Alright, you've gone so on me." I laugh, throwing my arms around her right as she lands a quick punch to my gut for my little comment. I wince in pain, watching as Martina steps away with a huge smirk as she eyes me from head to toe.

"You clean up well, dipshit." She nods in approval as I roll my eyes, leading both of us to the couch where Natasha sat watching our interaction with a smile.

"You're not too shabby either." I cough out, reeling from her punch as I plop down onto the far end of the couch.

"So I hear you finally grew some balls and got your girl. Let me tell you, it was about fucking time." Martina laughs, shamelessly reaching over to dig into the food as I snap my head to Natasha, who was stifling a laugh. For somebody who could keep her identity a secret for a living, she sure was shit at keeping things to herself.

"You told her?" I exclaim in disbelief, Natasha throwing her hands in the air as she tries to keep from laughing.

"She was prying!" Natasha defends, motioning to Martina who already had a mouthful of chicken tenders.

"You weren't telling me anything! I need some drama to live." Martina mumbles, her words muffled by the food as I sink back into place.

God, this all felt so normal. Sitting here with them, Martina with a face full of food, Natasha with a smile on her face—I don't think I've ever felt so familiar, so relaxed especially a er what happened the day Steve and I went g shopping.

I'm going to be honest, ever since then—and I never thought I'd live to see the day I admit this but I was afraid. I have this incredibly strong urge to keep looking over my shoulder, to check every corner, to glance over every single person who was approaching me because in my head, whoever was behind that mask is still out there.

She could be right next to me and I'd never even know.

The pain I felt on the ground of that alley stuck to me like glue. The way every inch of me burned, the way the air felt like razorblades slipping down my throat with every breath—it was still so vivid. If I close my eyes, I could still feel myself getting farther. I could feel the world spin, my own voice echoing in my body like I was trapped, like I no longer had control of my body. I was just a voice, a consciousness that keeps retreating.

I know Steve still beats himself up for not apprehending whoever attacked me. Sometimes I can still catch him looking at me with that same glint of guilt shining in his eyes, like he could still picture me laying in a pool of my own blood with a knife to my chest.

Sometimes when he puts his hand on my shoulder, or when we're walking and he guides me with the small of my back, I feel him shaking to touch me, like he was afraid I'd crumble with the slightest pressure. I knew there was nothing I could do for him, for any of them, that the most I could ever was more vigilance for myself.

"I got you a present, y'know." I nudge Martina, who looks to me with delighted surprise.

"Seriously?" She glances between me and Natasha, who nods happily before nodding over to the decorated paper bag that sat by the door.

She wastes no time in bolting to grab it, tearing it open to pull out the sleek, black leather jacket that kind of looked a lot like Natasha's, but it was tailored to her size. Her eyes light up immediately, tearing at the jacket she was wearing to try her present out with utmost awe.

"This is so fucking cool." She mumbles happily, running to the bathroom to get to a mirror before coming back absolutely beaming. She stood before us, giving us silly little poses in her new leather jacket as Natasha and I watch in amusement.

For the first time in a while she just looked like a child. A literal child on Christmas morning, with her big bright smile that radiated so much joy my heart melted a thousand times over. Natasha and I indulged into her antics, cheering her on as she treats the little space in front of the coffee table as a makeshift runway. The room filled with laughter and liveliness, just complete and utter warmth that contrasted with the light blanket of snow outside.

"Thank you, both of you—though this was very much owed." Martina hushes happily, plopping down onto the seat between Natasha and I.

"Owed?" I reiterate, raising a brow as Martina reaches over to pop another piece of chicken in her mouth.

"Yeah, you think dealing with you for a month was easy? I should be getting a fucking mansion. But this'll do, it's cool, I feel badass." She chuckles, mumbling as she chewed and I couldn't do anything but smile.

Smile because I was happy, in the pure sense of the world. Smile because for the first time in my life, despite all the discrepancies, all the flaws and cracks, I felt whole. I felt real. I felt like I was finally standing in front of the life I had hoped to glimpse. When that little, naive voice in my head told me there was more to life, this was it. This was the more.

Laughing in that cold New York City apartment, knowing I'd come back to a girl who loved me, meant the world to me and my sister—it wasn't perfect but I had her. I finally had her. Finally, scrubbing my life, a life outside of the wretched things that has been rebounding onto me, became truly possible. I could see it, it was so close, within reach and it was magical.

So Natasha and I stay till sundown, cracking open a few beers, even getting Natasha to show us a few ballet moves and laughing as she absolutely goes ballistic on her pointe shoes, repeatedly slamming it against the floorboards and bending it in half all while trying to explain it was mandatory. Music filled the air, along with stories and laughter and lazing around with our bellies just as full as our hearts.

"When are you coming back? Not that I'm waiting or anything—I was just going to dread it. That's all." Martina rushes defensively, watching as Natasha and I get set to leave.

"How about next week? If you're free, of course." I chuckle, standing by the door as Martina shrugs casually, shivering on her head as she hushes.

"I think I can fit you in." She finally concludes and I pull her into a quick embrace, leaving no time for her to be all prissy and pretend she's too cool for hugs. She eventually melts into me, lazily throwing an arm around my waist.

"Alright, alright. Get o." She shakes out of my grip, stepping back and dusting off her leather jacket as I stifles a laugh.

"Be good, alright?" Natasha chimes in, the car keys dangling on her fingers as she gives Martina a quick pat on the shoulder.

"I'm an angel, as usual." She beams as Natasha swings the door open. I take one last look at her before stepping out, Martina waiting by the door as Natasha and I head for the stairs.

"Drive safe, bug woman and dipshit!" She calls out right as we descend, Natasha and I grinning from ear to ear even until we reach the car.

Then, right as I'm about to get into the passenger side of the car, a paralyzing chill runs down my spine. My stomach drops, every bone in my body freezes as the feeling returns. The same feeling from the grocery store, the same sticky, uneasy feeling of eyes on me. I snap around, looking everywhere and when I'm met with measty pedestrians—I feel like I'm going crazy.

"Lexa? What's wrong?" Natasha calls from inside the car, leaning over the gear shift to look up at me but I was too busy going over every passing person, every corner, every crevice and window to properly take in her question.

"Lexa, hey." Natasha tried again, sounding more and more concerned with every passing second as her voice pulls back into reality. With reluctance, I slip into my seat, closing the door as my body wraps with cold sweat.

"What happened?" Natasha asks immediately, looking at me with furrowed brows as I stare blankly at her, finding it hard to choke out the words.

My mind was running a million miles an hour, my hands subtly shaking as I finally find the strength to shake my head. I was only being paranoid, there was nothing wrong. No masked figures, no blades. Natasha didn't have to get pulled into this a second time. Everything was fine.

At least, I hope so.

"Sorry, I just... felt sick. We should really get back." I lie, her eyes trailing over me as she settles back into her seat, glancing my way one last time before turning the ignition.

I could tell she was being lenient, that she didn't completely believe me, but she chose to stay silent anyway. The tension was impossible thick, my stomach churning in place as I find myself locked in a battle with my head. I'm doing everything I can to calm down, because I don't then I know Natasha would pry and I didn't want to cause more problems than I already have.

My eyes are darting everywhere, trying to focus on anything around me to distract my head. I'm watching the trees pass, staring at the road view, listening to the mundane sound of the car radio. I even try to think of Wanda as I stare at the crimson red car driving right behind us, trying to keep my mind on the one person who could calm me completely.

We've been driving for a while in silence, almost an hour including traffic when the sky begins to darken and my eyes gloss over the rear view mirror absentmindedly. It would have been fine, it would have just been any normal drive except...the same car was still behind us. The same red car that has been driving behind us since we pulled out of the curb by Natasha's apartment.

"Take a le." I say to Natasha, taking her by surprise as I keep my eyes on the mirror.

"What?" She asks, clearly confused as she glances over at me.

"Take a le." I push, and reluctantly, Natasha complies. Our car turns a corner, but so does the one behind us.

"Take another le." I instruct, and Natasha does it. She does it and so does the car.

With every passing second my heart slowly quickens, my stare dead set on the mirror as I instruct her to take another le, she does and the pattern continues. I know by then it was long shot that our paths were exactly the same, coincidences that close don't happen—especially not to us so with my heart in my throat, I take a breath and speak.

"Le." I tell Natasha, leading us in a full circle and when the car still comes into view, I realize one glaring fact for sure.

We're being followed.

"What's going on?" Natasha asks, eyes glancing up to the rear view as she finally pieces together what I did just seconds ago.

"It's been there since we le your building." I say so ly, breathlessly as Natasha actively speeds up.

We were farther from the tall skyscrapers and bustling city, and closer to the compound that was mostly surrounded by empty grass lots and trees. With the darkness getting more prominent and the streets getting less and less busy, Natasha floors the pedal, our car roaring as speed picks up. Natasha flawlessly wades through the little traffic, expertly swerving lanes as the car following us does the same, trying to match our pace.

With the entrance gate to the compound in sight and no other cars on the road, Natasha makes a quick turn, turning us around and driving the car to a stop by the side of the road as she quickly yanks open the glove compartment to reveal a handgun. Without missing a beat, she grabs the weapon, unlocks the doors and steps out. I scramble to follow, stepping out to the cold night air.

The red car comes to a stop, our headlights being the only illumination as the light pours onto the street and shines against the crimson vehicle. Even with direct lighting, the tint of the windshield was pitch black, dark enough to conceal the details of whoever was inside.

Natasha has her gun drawn, pointed right at the car as we stand side by side with our shadows etched onto the road. Then the door finally opens and the same dark figure stepping out. Pitch black cloak, same matte mask pressed onto their face as my heart stops. My body goes cold as Natasha instinctively uses a hand to yank me behind her, never letting her aim falter as she keeps the gun pointed to whoever stood before us.

"Who are you?" Natasha flatly questions, venom dripping from her voice as I will myself to move—to speak—to not hide behind her like some pathetic little kid.

"What do you want from me?" I find my voice, stepping out from behind Natasha as she glances at me sharply.

The figure only stands there, staring at me. I can't see its eyes, but I can feel it sticking to me like glue. I couldn't wash o, it felt menacing, dreadful, like the longer I stood under its gaze, the worse this sinking feeling would get until it devours me whole.

Then it finally moves, revealing its hands as the familiar glint of the dagger shines under our car's headlights. Everything floods back, my eyes glued to the item in its hands as it takes a slow, torturous step forward.

"Take another step and I'll shoot." Natasha warns sternly, momentarily freezing the figure in place, almost as if I were in thought, before it takes another step.

Natasha delivers without hesitation, the booming sound of a bullet leaving the barrel, the flash of light, the bullet burrowing through the figure's thigh, it all happens in a single second. The longest fucking second of my life, but they don't even flinch. Not even when the glistening blood trails down their thigh, it only stings them.

Then it all happens in slow motion, their free hand moving up to grasp the mask—the mask that comes o with ease to reveal a face that completely drains my blood. I go completely cold, white to the bone—and so does Natasha. We stood there like we had seen a ghost, but in a way—we were.

Because behind the mask was Estelle.

A small smile on her signature red lips, her blue eyes shining in the cold night air as she looks back at me. It can't be possible—how could she be alive? I watched her die. My finger was the one that pulled the trigger that shot through her chest. I heard the thump of her body, the lifeless look on her face. She supposed to be dead and yet there she was, looking back at me like nothing had ever changed.

"Estelle?" It falls from my lips in a whisper that traces the thick air, it was more like a question to myself than to her. It was going crazy, I'm almost sure of it.

"Good to know you remember me, mon amour." She says, her voice sending chills down my spine as she uses the same dreaded nickname she reserves for me. It turns my gut, makes me feel sick.

"You're supposed to be dead." I utter, glancing at Natasha who looked just as puzzled as I did as she keeps her smoking hot gun pointed at Estelle.

"So are you but we've never been so great doing what we're supposed to do, no?" She chuckles so ly, flipping the dagger in her hand with nonchalance. She looks down at her bleeding leg, a free hand going to swipe a streak of blood onto her fingertips as she brings it to her face for inspection.

"Oh, you've made me bleed again." She sighs mockingly, shaking her head as she returns her eyes to me.

"I'll gladly do it over and over." Natasha cuts in, her sharp glare never leaving Estelle's face as she laughs.

"A lot has changed since we've last seen each other, Ms. Romko. I assume you'd find me...a lot harder to kill." She hums, a smirk on her lips as she glances down to her thigh. The hole burred through her pants, the fabric covered in blood and yet—no wound.

She's healed.

"That's for me to judge." Natasha says, wasting no time in firing again, peppering Estelle's chest in bullets that don't even faze her. She just stumbles back a short distance like she had been lightly pushed, not shot ten times through the heart.

"Very well. This is getting boring." She tucks the blade into her pocket, stopping herself of her cloak and bolting towards us.

Natasha tosses her gun, going head to head as I instinctively rush in too. This is my mess, and if Natasha was going to risk her life for me then she wouldn't be doing it alone. Without dilly, Estelle dodges most of Natasha's hits, blocking her by the throat and tossing her back to land upon the hood of our car. The impact dents the metal, the alarm blaring as Estelle then turns to me.

She goes to reach for her blade, but I block her with a kick to her chest that disrupts her balance. Stumbling and scrambling, I land punch a er punch to her face, watching with frustration as every cut heals just as it's drawn. She catches my punch in her palm, twisting my arm and delivering a solid kick to my sternum that knocks the wind out of me.

My back hits the ground with a pained thud, my head whipping to hit the solid cement as the impact nearly spins my vision white. The only person who ever hit me that hard was Lara. Estelle's footsteps draw near, mixing with the sound of Natasha crawling o the hood with a groan and going in for another round.

As I'm scrambling to get up, I realize Natasha was losing. Estelle's got her in a headlock, Natasha desperately squirming under her grip as her complexion slowly grows pale. I grab a shard from our broken windshield, the glass slicing through the skin of my fingers as I stumble close enough to Estelle, burying the glass deep in the side of her neck.

She releases Natasha instantly, the gush of blood instantly covering most of her shoulder as she fishes the shard out with an angered hush. Natasha was on the ground, on her knees trying to catch her breath while I was desperately trying to keep Estelle's attention on me.

With her calm composure in shambles, anger flares in her eyes as she slips the dagger out of her pocket. She steps closer to me, throwing punches that I dodge but she catches me with a kick, using her momentum to land hit a er hit until she kicks me to the ground. My head was spinning, the pain of her blows aching every inch of my body as she stands above me, a foot on each side of my hips as she lowers herself down.

She gently rests the tip of the dagger above my heart, the sharp metal already pressing through the fabric of my shirt as I look up at her and see pure determination in her blue eyes. She begins to apply pressure, brows furrowed as feel the familiar ache begin to spread in my chest. The warmth was startling, spreading like a spark slowly crawling into a roaring flame as her eyes lock with mine.

"You chose wrong." She whispers, sinking the blade deeper as the scorching feeling keeps on growing. I felt like I was being lowered into flames, feeling alive from the inside out. I was struggling to look at Natasha, to find her. I needed to know she was alive.

"You really would do anything for them, wouldn't you?" Estelle breathes, realizing what I was squirming to do.

"I'll make you a deal, mon amour. You die tonight—and I won't touch your little friends. I was never here for them, only for you." She leans in, plants a cold kiss to my cheek as she whispers.

"—who sent you?" I utter out, pained and weak as tears begin to well up in my eyes.

"The corrector sends her regards, mon amour." Estelle smiles and I close my eyes, not wanting her face to be my last conscious memory.

I wanted something good, something that made me happy. If this was really it, I wanted to live in the good parts of my memory. Lara smiling back at me in our living room, Martina doing silly dances in her leather jacket, Natasha's laughter, Steve's kind words—Wanda's kisses. The feeling of her lips on mine—the way she looks at me like I'm the most beautiful thing the universe had ever created. That's what I wanted to lose myself in.

Right when I was on the verge of acceptance, the blade freezes.

The sinking stops, and a weight is lifted o of me. I thought I was dreaming, that I finally died and it was just me finding peace or whatever cheesy thing people say when death comes knocking at their door until it's promptly yanked out and my eyes shoot open to see wisps of red.

Before I could understand what was happening, I feel a strong grip around my upper arms, dragging me until I feel my back press against something solid. As my vision starts spinning and my ears start ringing, I come to see I'm find Steve, leaning right in front of me trying to keep my head up with his hands cupping my cheeks.

"Stay here." He instructs in a rush, eyes looming over with urgency as he steps away.

I realize he had dragged me to sit back against our car, and when I turn my head, just a few steps away, I see a familiar figure—a woman hair and crimson energy mixing with the illumination from the headlights.

Wanda.

Her back was turned to me, an arm outstretched as my eyes land on Estelle, who was lifted from the ground with Wanda's magic wrapped around her neck. She squirms under the pressure, the same chilling determination swimming in her blue eyes as Wanda's shared voice cuts through the air.

"How are you alive?" Wanda seethes, her hoarse tone dripping of resentment as she li. Estelle even higher.

"I can't never die." Estelle utters out, feet swinging wildly as she tries—and fails to get a grip on Wanda's magic.

"Oh, you can. You will, nevertheless a finger on her again." Wanda growls, but right before she could do anything else Estelle manages to fish something out of her pocket, tossing it to the ground between them in a last ditch effort of desperation as my eyes fixate on the item.

A grenade.

Natasha seems to have seen it too, because in a split second her magic dissipates and Estelle falls to the ground. Almost immediately, the grenade is propelled up into the air, but it explodes before it gets high enough out of reach. The air shakes around us, Wanda stumbling back to fall to the ground as a sea of agents begin to flood out of the main gates.

Without another thought, my heart stops as I use all of my strength to scramble to my feet, bolting over to where Wanda laid and falling to my knees right by her head. I desperately pull her up and against me, resting her torso against my chest as I use a free hand to cup her face.

Everything in me is screaming, my bones aching as our eyes meet. She's conscious, she's alive. She's looking back at me and I don't think I had ever been so fucking grateful to see green in my field of life.

"It's okay. We're okay." I mumble in a rush, wrapping my arms around her as she flips to throw herself against me.

I don't know how I keep my balance but I do. I pull her impossibly close, both of us kneeling on the ground as we hold onto each other like our lives depended on it.

"Search the area now!" Steve's sharp exclamation rings through the air, pulling Wanda and I from our bubble as we snap to look at him, standing over Natasha who was leashed up against the front of the car.

"Where'd she go? Where's the dagger?" I ask, Wanda and I rising to our feet as my eyes comb around me.

No Estelle—and no dagger.

"She was just there." Wanda sounded just as confused, just as doused in disbelief as all that was left to even prove she existed was the empty red cars drove to follow us.

Steve looked most upset, his frustration peeking through having let Estelle get away a second time. Steve runs out with the agents, heading into the trees with urgency as Natasha struggles to rise to her feet. Wanda and I rush to her side, holding her up as she eventually waves o our grip.

"I'm fine—I'm fine." Natasha dismisses, a hand on her bruising neck as she carefully tilts her head for a stretch.

"I'm sorry, Nat," I breathe, the guilt striking me worse this time around as I watch her bruises deepen.

"You almost died and you're the one apologizing?" Natasha raises a brow, looking at me like she couldn't believe I was serious—but I am. She could have died too, and the fact that she didn't seem all that concerned only sank my heart.

"Look, we're not doing this again okay? You saved me. I'm the one who should be apologizing that I couldn't... prevent it." She sighs, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder as my eyes land on Steve, jogging back to us with a scowl painted onto his lips.

"She's gone." He says, looking to me as his face falls.

"I'm sorry." He whispers and for some reason, the only thing that echoes in my mind are Estelle's chilling words.

"You chose wrong."