

Silence. It was what I always wanted, even if it were only for a second. A blink in time that no one would remember. It felt like everything was always going, always moving around me at a million miles an hour, preventing us from ever just sitting in peace and quiet. In silence. It remained only a distant dream for me. A dream for them too, even though they always seemed to be the ones running the silence away.

I was always greedy when it came to quiet time, taking whatever sliver of it I could find. Quiet, and peace. Just allowing myself to sit for a moment and forget I had responsibilities. Forget that I had things to do, forget that I had burdens bearing down on me from every side, threatening to crush me, trying to squeeze the life out of me, trying to take away my fight or blow out my candle of hope. Silence helped me forget about it, if only for a millisecond in comparison to the time that it weighed heavily on my mind.

But what is silence other than the absence of sound?

The sounds I was once used to were the thumping of footsteps on the floor above me, or sometimes on the same floor as me because *someone* would forget that they'd been cooking. The sound of the shower being turned on, and the occasional sound of a foot slipping against the wet floor tiles. The scribbling of pencil on paper, either from Koda's drawing or Maverick's composing. Maverick would sing a lot, too, though that'd been one of my favorite noises. He'd had a lovely voice.

I remember the sound of Koda and Maverick bickering over who would be cooking dinner that night, only to end up ordering pizza on the payphone outside. I remember Koda's obnoxiously loud chewing with said pizza. Or the soft purring and meowing of the cat that'd taken residence with us in our small, abandoned warehouse. And I remember the screeching from the same cat when we attempted to give it a bath.

Koda had been the youngest of us three. I was older by a year, and Maverick was older than me by two years. Koda, though.. he was an energetic kid. Though I guess I can't very well call him a kid without referring to myself as one too, huh? We'd all been kids, looking back on it. Old enough to be on our own, yet not old enough to be considered adults.

I remember how much Koda would look out for us though, despite being the youngest. Always asking us how we were, if we were okay. On our bad days, he'd always try and do something special for us. I remember one day in particular. I'd been thinking about my family, how much I'd missed them, only for Koda to greet me that evening with a drawing of a beautiful snowy forest. I'd always loved the snow. He had such a kind heart.

Maverick was.. heh, Maverick. Always had to be the mature one, though it never stopped him from acting like the kid we all knew he was. It was almost funny, how insistent he was that he had to "act like an adult since you two clearly won't!" despite only being seventeen years old. I was also grateful for how steady of a foundation he was, though. Always willing to listen, to offer advice when we would bring him something that upset us. And like I said, he had a beautiful singing voice. Once I'd been laying in my bed in the dead of night, wide awake, only to hear a soft voice coming from our 'living room.' I knew I wouldn't be sleeping anytime soon, so I'd gone to see, even though I knew who I would find. Maverick, singing a song that I have since forgotten. It'd been so beautiful. I remember returning to my room and eventually falling asleep as his gentle tune continued.

There were always so many sounds in just a single day, and I barely even scratched the surface here. The only time I'd ever have any silence, other than the rare occasions when those two weren't around, was in the tiny room that had come to be my bedroom. There were days that I'd

sit on the floor in the space my bed did not take up and would simply.. be. I would just exist, let my anxieties fade for a fraction of a section, until more noise returned. A consistent cycle.

I did love them, of course I did. I still do. I'd loved them with all my heart. Despite all the noise, nothing could ever make me stop loving them. They were my friends, my brothers. Yet they were just.. noisy sometimes. It felt like I could not get away. Usually I was able to handle it, but other times it would be too loud, too constant, too much, and I would have to retreat to my room.

There was always some sort of noise, always.

Until *it* started. The war. There had been rumors for years that it was coming, that it was no longer "if," but "when." And yet no one expected it to come so soon. All three of us ended up going. We were forced to. The 'Draft,' they called it. We stayed together, clung to each other. We were brothers, not in blood, but in bond. Nothing was separating us.

We received minimal training, as there wasn't much time left. Aim the gun, shoot it, don't die; though we could tell in the way they told us that it was more "do your best not to die but don't expect too much." That's what they told us. We didn't know who we were fighting. We didn't know *why* we were fighting. They didn't even tell us where we were stationed. They put some of us on a plane, and once we arrived at the airport, we were immediately transported to our stations.

We were all scared. You could even say terrified. The three of us didn't have families other than each other, but the young men and women there that did were constantly worried about their families back at home. I witnessed one man—no, he was a boy still—having a panic attack because he was so worried about his family. He didn't know where they were when he was transported to

this foreign land; he didn't know if they were safe, or if they were even alive. He was probably two years younger than I was. No one should ever have those fears.

I remember one conversation the three of us had one late night. We had all been sitting in silence, each of us knowing that we would be going to the battlefield the next day. Koda started the conversation.

"Please tell me I'm not the only one terrified about waking up tomorrow morning." His gaze shifted between Maverick and me.

"No, Koda," I answered first. "We're all scared. I wish that we didn't have to be here."

"But we're here together. No matter what happens tomorrow, we are a family, and nothing will change that," Maverick added.

"Not even a war." I choked out. By now, all three of us had tears in our eyes. We knew that there was a possibility of one of us, or even all of us, not returning. None of us wanted to bring it up.

And so we didn't.

"I love you guys so much." Koda whispered as a stray tear fell from his eye.

We didn't go to sleep that night. We stayed up and comforted each other through the hours of the night, our whispering and quiet cries the only noises. Ironically, it never hit me in the moment how silent it was.

We had just been scared kids, forced into a war we didn't want.

Soon, the sun began to slowly rise over the horizon. Much too soon.

We did as we were told to do when it was our day to leave: check your uniform, get your gun, and be ready at the vehicle when it was time to leave. Something in the pit of my stomach had felt off. Something wasn't right. But there was no time to question it. We had orders.

The silence. If I had gotten a second of silence at home, I got less than half that there in that dreaded place. I missed the sounds of home. All I heard was gunshots. Explosions. People yelling out commands. The soldiers around me hitting the ground. The splatters of blood and gore. Screams of pain like I'd never even imagined. Crying. Someone behind me gasping because they'd just killed someone. Killed someone who had a family at home. Maybe had a wife and kids. Even a mother and a father who would undoubtedly be awaiting his return.

I hated the battlefield immediately. We had only been out there for a short time and I'd wanted nothing more than to just stop existing right then and there. If that meant no more pain and suffering around me, I would've happily taken it. But unfortunately, that was not an option, so I shot, and I shot, and I shot, some of my bullets hitting their mark. At one point I was tempted to miss on purpose if only to keep my ears from hearing the agonized screams of my targets as the bullet ripped through their skin and muscle. But I was pulled from my thoughts when I heard a noise even worse than any I had heard so far on that cursed battlefield.

A scream ripped itself from Maverick, but it was not one of physical pain, but rather as if his very soul had been ripped out of his body, leaving behind only an empty abyss. I turned frantically in all directions trying to find him. When my eyes met him, I wished I had just kept fighting. In Maverick's arms was Koda, eyes staring ahead at absolutely nothing. Missing the life and spark that they'd always had. Empty. Dulled. I ran over to the two of them.

A bullet hole was in his chest, still dripping streams of crimson. I was silent. Everything I had ever wanted—silence—was all my body would allow me to release. Be quiet. I couldn't move, I couldn't speak. I could simply stare at that limp body that stared straight ahead.

“He can't leave! This was never supposed to happen to him! Koda!” Maverick's words were filled with such pain and agony for our fallen friend. I shared his sorrow, but my body would not move still. I was frozen in shock. Someone like Koda should never have to look like that.

Someone so full of life did not deserve to have that same life ripped from him and replaced with death. He shouldn't have been replaced with *silence*.

Maverick looked up to me, and I slowly moved my eyes from the empty body and to my dear friend instead. His eyes...I'll never forget the suffering I saw in them. Finally, my body listened to my brain and I fell to the ground beside him and embraced him. His arms wrapped around my neck. I could feel his tears hitting my shoulder, and mine did the same to his. After just a few seconds like that, I had to speak up.

“We have to move him, and we need to find some cover. It's not safe to be out in the open like this,” I solemnly said. Maverick nodded and closed Koda's eyes to give him peace. We both worked to pick him up and moved Koda to a more covered area. The two of us hated to simply leave him there, but we couldn't take him with us.

We had to return to the battlefield, much to our sorrow. Maverick ran out first, and I left a few seconds after him. However, something small came hurtling towards him, and before I could call out to him, fire erupted and I could no longer see him.

The blast had sent me a few feet back, and then I rolled a few more. Fiery heat licked at the soles of my shoes and my legs. My ears were ringing, and it was so bright. I looked up and saw fire

and smoke so thick that I could not see through it. But I didn't need to see through it to know what was in it. Maverick. Just gone in an instant. And what had I done to stop it? Nothing.

My two best friends, my brothers, gone in the blink of an eye.

I don't remember much from the war. I did my best to forget all that I could about it. I had no desire to remember the terrible sounds and images, but some things were sewn into my head. I went home, tired, sore, and gross. My eyelids were heavy and begged for sleep, but my mind rejected any possibility of that idea. My mind was still on the battlefield. Seeing Koda dead, seeing Maverick consumed by flames and forced into the jaws of death, feeling that fire, screaming my lungs out in agony and anguish.

I sat down on the couch we once all sat on and came to a startling realization as my ears were met with a new sound. Silence. But it wasn't completely silent. I heard things I'd never heard in that small abandoned house before. I heard the remnants from yesterday's storm dripping from the gutters. The quiet yet consistent creaking and groaning of the house. My foot as it silently tapped on the floor. The quiet whirring of the refrigerator, no doubt full of now-expired food. My fingers weaving together. My own breathing. The cat was still there; it entered the room with a quiet purr. The wind outside causing a tree branch to softly brush against the window. My tears hitting the ground.

This was the part where they walked through the door, right? They couldn't actually be gone. Not them. No war could claim them. No battle could dampen their spirit. Nothing could...*kill* them.

But that's exactly what had happened. They were gone, killed, dead. They weren't coming back.

They were victims of war, prisoners of death, slaves of the reaper.

A sob wrenched its way from the pit of my gut and escaped my throat. The tears flooded from my eyes like a hurricane. I let my head fall, grabbing fistfuls of hair in each hand. They were gone. Gone, gone, *GONE!*

I thought the silence was what I wanted. It was all I had wished for before that blasted war. I had begged myself to find a fraction of time to be alone for peace and quiet. Yet there I was, surrounded by the very thing I had wished for so often, but it was just crushing. Blinding. The silence was the loudest scream my ears had ever heard.