

I used to crave the silence when I was always surrounded by noise. I could still recall gunshots and screams, my comrades' last expressions, the sound of orders being yelled, the sound of running feet.

I found that I didn't want silence, I just wanted a different noise.

Silence is terrifying.

I watched my feet plod away on the stone streets as I tried to remember when I last heard the noise they made. The fountain in the square had been on for the last week, though the air was still cold from the remnants of a passing winter. I could hear within my mind a faint echo of what its splashing waters sounded like, but just like you can't fully picture a face within your mind, I couldn't fully remember the noise. My feet stopped their plodding. How many noises in the square at that moment was I missing? Laughter, conversation, splashing, scolding, and all the sounds of life itself were lost.

My eyes bounced between the different faces, mouths open in smiles--except for hers. She sat on the bench facing the fountain, staring down at pale, folded hands with an empty expression. Her eyes danced the line between contentment and sorrow; one moment she seemed as if she might cry, but the more I looked, the more she seemed almost happy to be where she was. I admired her a brief moment longer, so still and quiet. Then her eyes darted upwards at a blue butterfly that had fluttered into her view. She followed its flight until it broke into the space between my eyes and hers, and her gaze met mine. Embarrassment flooded my features and I looked away, forcing my feet to plod along once more.

My fingers were immersed in cinnamon dough all that morning, and it seemed as if my hands were sputtering along on auto pilot while my mind still lingered in the memory of the square. I set out the freshly baked loaves into the bakery's counter display, the warmth still clinging onto my fingertips. A fleeting idea crossed my mind as I went to set the last loaf into its place. I smiled to myself and held onto it.

It was my lunch break when the bell swung on the door, catching little glints of the sun with the same swiftness of a little boy racing to catch gold coins. The square was full with the hustle and bustle of midday. Children were beginning to cry that they were hungry, men congregated to laugh with drinks in hand, families sat down to eat in the presence of the fountain; all of it came at once in waves of silence.

There was silence when there should have been noise--the terrifying, lonely silence.

My thoughts began to wander along with my feet to uniform and weaponry, the dirt underneath a failing resolve, the smell of smoke and the way it lingered on your lips like saltwater clings to the skin.

But there it was again--the blue butterfly. It pierced my line of sight like a bullet of saturated blue, almost glowing as the sunlight bounced off its delicate wings. As if it was leading my eyes, it flitted up to where the girl still sat on the bench, just as silent and contemplative as she had been that morning. In fact, she didn't look like she'd moved at all since I last saw her, and there was no sign that she had eaten anything. It made me wonder if out of the hundreds of people who cross the square each day, none of them stopped to help her. I knew that homes had begun to house more abandoned victims who'd had everything from their brothers and fathers to their properties stripped away from them. Others of these victims, ones who lacked things even as commonplace as speech, were deemed useless to those homes and left behind. There was not a word spoken in pity of them.

Their silence was cruel.

I crossed the square to her and gently tapped her shoulder.

She raised her head with a curious mixture of relief, confusion, and exhaustion in her eyes. They were an intense blue much like the wings of the butterfly, being saturated with thoughts and expressions that made them deep and endless like polished lapis lazuli. She didn't speak a word, only looked.

I held out the bag with the loaf I'd saved. I wasn't certain she could understand, but then she nodded.

I handed her the bag.

She held it delicately in her hands, almost shocked that I'd given it all to her.

I gave an awkward nod and turned to leave, but her fingers caught the edge of my coat. A small girl would've had a similar look to hers when she held the hand of her dearest friend and begged her mother to let them play together just a little longer.

I sat down on the bench next to her, and her eyes brightened once more. She peered into the bag with the subtle glee of a child at Christmas who'd waited anxiously all night to open the first of their gifts. Her soft hands took out the loaf and I helped her break off a piece from the tip. Cupping the piece into both her hands, she gazed at it while her tears began building around the little windows to her soul. It was another smile that caused them to spill onto her cheeks. Her eyes said all the words I ever needed to see in a silence that was almost...*beautiful*.

In that silence, she was able to speak and I was able to hear.

I came to her the next day, then the next, and the following after that, each time with something I'd made at the bakery. For the first time, I knew a silence that was warm. One day she even came to the bakery early, and I made her a cinnamon cookie in the shape of a butterfly. That one was her favorite.

Our silence was beautiful.

I used to crave the silence when I was always surrounded by noise. I found that I didn't want a different noise, but only a different kind of silence--a *beautiful* silence.