Nociception

by VenalMagpie

Summary

The less Elita ate, the more the boundary between dreams and reality blurred. Sleep haunted by a captivating vision of the end she can't decide whether or not she wants, Elita is a bloated corpse, appealing only to the most sleepy-eyed, soft-spoken vulture. What will take priority- embracing the wishes of her sick brain, or escaping the violent whims of the real demons creeping through her classrooms?

Notes

I do not own any of the characters or settings other than Elita, Brienne, and their respective families- Diabolik Lovers is the property of Rejet.
Make time to reflect on your goals for the day in order to quell anxiety. Identify the cause, and write three ways to tackle the problem.

Easier said than done.

I looked down at the uniform I’d laid on the floor next to my bed. It was far more elaborate than the stuff back in Paris, only making me feel more anxious. The black, pleated skirt even came with a white petticoat for fucks sake. It was clearly designed to flatter bodies far smaller than me, without the rolls of festering fat clinging to my hips and thighs and… well, everything. Wasn’t the ‘new kid’ anxiety supposed to wear off after two weeks? Why had I even decided that moving would be a good idea? Why did my parents let me move to the other side of the world? Yeah it was pretty awful back home, but at least I could bitch about my life in my own language.

“I’ve made a mistake.”

I could feel Grimm looking at me, his large ears tilting towards me. It was hard to imagine a rabbit looking impatient until there was one staring you down from across the room. Ignoring the aching of my joints (reminder: put a t-shirt under jumper in bed) I made my way to the tiny kitchen. It was hospital beige, but it served its purpose. My companion followed me, soon joined by my other rabbit, Gloom. Her coat was plush and jet black. How many rabbits did it take to make a fur coat? How many of her cousins and uncles were draped over a mannequin’s shoulders in a shop window? I tried to keep my mind busy as I reached into the sparse fridge (can’t binge when there’s nothing in the house) and plucked out what was needed. It was easier to make our food the same, and greens always were (crossed out- low calorie) tasty. Even the disks of carrot made me drool. It smelled so sweet. Surely, nothing was wrong with just one disk? The rabbits had them every day, and they spent most of their time stretched out in the sun.

Dumping the salad into a bowl with more force than necessary, I tried not to trip over the two impatient pests as I unlocked the door leading to the small balcony. Although the rails were tightly packed, the first thing I’d done upon moving was reinforce every gap with chicken wire. No coming home to a bloody pavement.

Now it was time to finish my own food.

I scraped the remaining third of the salad into a tuppaware box and looked reluctantly at the table posted on the fridge. The magnet was cloud-shaped with a tiny cartoon smile.

Monday, Week 3: Lunch- White bread roll with butter, cheese, lettuce, and cucumber.
100g of cashew nuts
100g of chocolate
300ml of strawberry and banana smoothie

Well, the cucumber was there. I didn’t have any money to buy chocolate because I’d bought the rabbits a new hide, and the smoothie had gone off because I didn’t finish it off fast enough. It was all bullshit of course. Even with all of the money in the world there was no way in hell I’d eat that. I put on enough in hospital to last all winter, so much it sagged from my bones.

I shivered and grabbed a box of raisins. That would make up for the chocolate. I was fine. I was in control.
The sun was beginning to set already. Quickening my pace enough to make my heart rattle in my chest, I returned to my room. It was too cold to wear just one pair of tights. Maybe two? And some socks? The sharp edge of my ankle bone disappeared under the layers of nylon and wool. The lines, each their own shade of pink or white or red- were smothered under my vest-top, and then the rest of my uniform. I’d stopped shivering by then; my hands were steady as I tied the pink ribbon into a bow. My bag, which still smelled vaguely of dance-studio (the fabric cleaner lied) was packed with the books I’d need. Part of the deal of me moving was going to a ‘good school’, and the one closest to the doctor’s office was notorious for attracting intelligent eccentrics, and straight-up oddballs. That was what the headmaster got for opening it up at night.

Which group did I fit in?

With my… shaky understanding of Japanese, it was unlikely I’d be making school council anytime soon. Half of the weight in my backpack was down to the workbooks I’d cram in before class started. I made one last check that the rabbits would be ok before sliding the door almost completely closed, leaving enough room for them to slip back inside if they wanted, before heading out and locking the door behind me. One step into the corridor and I felt exhausted. It would be so easy to just… not.

The air was cold out, and I tugged the scarf wound around my neck up, covering the lower half of my face. Bathed in the dull orange light from the street-lights, the route to the school seemed especially sleepy. Chatter leaked out of the more popular bars onto the empty streets, making me quicken my pace slightly. I’d always enjoyed walking out at night, but the prospect of some drunken weirdo lurching out of the bar and cat-calling me in a language I didn’t understand was nerve-wracking. I’d never been good at telling people to fuck off back in Paris, and at least I knew all the right words back there.

I turned left, leaving behind the slightly sketchy street onto one decidedly more fancy. Ornamental plum trees lined the road stretching ahead. A few other early birds in the same uniform were headed in the same direction as I. I had history first, which was alright. There was a group project coming up though, and the prospect of burdening somebody with my sub-par Japanese wasn’t exactly thrilling.

Since the lecturer was milling around the staff room (on his third cup of coffee if his jerky movements were anything to go buy) I sat down on the far side of the classroom. I didn’t think anybody sat there... hopefully Jesus wouldn’t take this chance to punish me for all of the times I pretended to be asleep when my parents wanted to ‘have a talk’ with me. I’d spent the first two weeks going to Japanese classes all day (not that it made much difference). Reluctantly I brought out my workbooks and flipped through the dog-eared pages to my unfinished exercise. ‘Casual classroom conversation~’

I was so focused on the unfamiliar characters when a girl entered the classroom. She approached my desk cautiously, hesitating before clearing her throat quietly. I looked up from my workbook at the stranger. With blonde, curly hair and bright eyes, she looked like a Disney princess.

“Oh, excuse me, but I think you’re in my seat,” the girl pointed out. In stark comparison to mine, her bag was heavy and not a lumpy, cuboidal shape from shoving too many books in. She probably had a locker somewhere…

It took a second to find the right words, “I’m sorry. I’ll move.” It came out curter than I meant, and I winced, apologising again, “I’m sorry.”

She put her hands in front of her, a cute smile on her face now, “Don’t worry! The seat next to me is free if you’d like to sit there- you won’t have to move your bag as far. It looks pretty heavy.” Her voice was friendly.
“You should have the window. I need to pick up as much as I can,” I smiled back at her. As she put her bag down on the table, her eyes scanned the workbook on the table. A flash of realisation crossed her face, “Oh, you’re the student who just came from Paris! You’re very brave coming all the way over here.”

She bowed, her hair falling over her eyes, “My name is Komori Yui, and it’s lovely to meet you.”

Unsure of what to do, I flustered, awkwardly standing up from the seat so that I could bow back. At least I didn’t knock my bag off of my desk like an utter dick. “It’s nice to meet you, Yui-san. I’m DuVal Elita.” I knew I was blushing like an idiot. “My apologies, I’m not used to Japanese just yet. Please forgive any slip-ups I have.”

Yui smiled at me again as she sat down, “Don’t worry, you’re doing well. It must be nerve-wracking coming to school.”

I nodded. Maybe Jesus had decided to spare this sinner, unless he was just bluffing, introducing me to somebody lovely and then pairing me with a real snob for the actual project.

We both sat quietly for a while, watching as the wind teased the branches of the trees outside. People filed into the classroom noisily, setting their bags on the desks and finishing off their anecdotes from the weekend past. I was able to catch a few words- ‘bed’ and ‘garden’ and ‘running’- but nothing much. I’d have to work harder at my general vocabulary if I wanted to stray from the ‘essential phrases’. I was just making up my own story- a girl running through a rose garden from monsters with glowing eyes- when the lecturer entered. He was an older gentlemen who reminded me of my old tap teacher. Very good at what he did, but in a world of his own.

Standing at his desk and allowing the class to fall silent, the teacher shuffled through some papers. “As you all know,” he began, “We have been studying Japan’s role in WWII and the relationship between the leader of the time and Adolf Hitler.”

What a cheery topic to start the year with.

“To encourage you to investigate, you’ll work in pairs to make a presentation based on the topic I give you. I’m sure you don’t need reminding, but the school library has just been updated, and there are more than enough resources there alone to make a good project. Extra research wouldn’t hurt though.” He scanned the classroom, weighing up the pros and cons of creating random pairs or letting the students choose. It seemed that the stacks of paper on his desk deserved his immediate attention.

“You can choose your partner. Move to sit next to them if you are not already, and I’ll come over with your topic to investigate.”

Yui turned to me and tucked her hair behind her ear, “Would you like to work together? I can look at the books in the library and you can do online research if that’d be easier for you.” It wasn’t a bad suggestion, and I nodded. Really, Yui was a ray of sunshine.

“Thank you. You’re very thoughtful.”

Her smile grew slightly, “Thank you! Being nice to people makes the whole world a better place to be.”

We chatted as we waited for the lecturer to give us our topic. She seemed to intuitively know when to slow down or change phrasing, and it was a god send. I was even able to make a joke (albeit a not very funny one) and she gave a musical laugh.

Our jolly mood changed when the lecturer gave us our topic- technological advances. It wouldn’t be especially hard to find material, but it was heavier than a sack of bricks. Still, Yui was positive as we were dismissed from class. Even though it was change-over period, the hallways weren’t packed with people. I guess that’s what happens when you open a private school at night- not many
students are awake to wind their way through the halls.

“Yui-san, would you like to meet up in the library during lun… Yui-san?” The blonde was focused on somebody in the distance. He was tall with dark hair and glasses, and… white gloves? It was cold, but not that cold.

She noticed my look and apologised, “I’m sorry Elita-san, but it looks like my friend needs me.” Something about the ‘friend’ didn’t seem that relaxed, but I didn’t know the language that well. Maybe it was just some nuance or dialect or something… I wasn’t doing the best job convincing myself.

“I’ll email you! Has the school given you an email? Here, I wrote mine down on that piece of paper we made the plan on.” Despite there being plenty of time to get to class, she seemed antsy. Maybe the guy at the end of the hallway was impatient? Still, it was hard to imagine anybody getting annoyed at somebody as nice as her.

Turning to head down the hall, Yui waved, “I’ll see you next history lesson! Sorry again!”

Despite her small stature, Yui made her way quickly through the crowd. The boy at the end of the hall visibly sighed, but didn’t so much as glance in my direction before heading down the hall. He seemed older. Maybe it was a tutoring session.

The crowds were just thinning when I stuffed my planner and school map back into my bag. I had English next, which wasn’t nearly as daunting as history. We were taught English from an early age in France, and I was better at it than Japanese (which apparently wasn’t hard if my stunted conversation was anything to go by). Regretting bringing the extra books, I heaved the heavy backpack onto my shoulders again, and was about to head off when a cold hand tapped on my shoulder.

Needless to say I nearly had a heart attack and span around like a drunk figure skater at the sudden contact. The boy before me didn’t seem phased at all though. His grey eyes blinked slowly at me.

“You smell… like Yui-san.”

UUUUH.

“I sit next to her in history,” I said uncertainly. Surely I misheard him. Sure I wasn’t used to the customs, but there was no way that commenting on somebody’s smell was a regular conversation starter.

He shook his head languidly, “No, that’s not it…. It’s something… in you.”

UUUUUUUUUH

“I’ve got to… meet Ruki. Goodbye…”

Before I could question what the fuck he was talking about, the beret-boy had waved his hand, and headed down the corridor with speed unexpected from such a slow talker.

Thoughts buzzed around my head like flies, battering my skull in search for an escape.

Who is beret-boy?

Who is Ruki?

*How am I meant to translate French into Japanese for the project?*

There was only one thing to do. I put my head in my hands, groaned like a ship being torn in half, and headed to my next lecture. The last thing I needed on top of all that was a late-slip for English.
The teacher believed in only speaking English while in the confines of his classroom, and honestly, it was a huge relief. Even if I got some of the words wrong, the letters were natural to me, and I didn’t have to worry about accidentally offending anyone by using the wrong honourifics. I ignored the aching pain spreading from my stomach and headed to the library to email Yui. It would probably take the whole of the break to log onto my email- typing was so difficult. Unsurprisingly, the library was as extravagant as the rest of the building. The far wall was studded with wide windows, revealing the city lights. The shelves were tall enough to warrant shelves for all those not freakishly tall, and were stuffed with old tomes and textbooks. The computers were new though, and I felt exposed as I put my stuffed school bag under the table and (with minor difficulty) logged on.

While the computer promised it hadn’t moved my files, I took the chance to see what other masochists were spending their break instead of eating or hanging out with their friends. There were a few girls flicking through anthologies of poetry, and the odd last-minute printer, but apart from that the library was empty.

Never mind.

A familiar face entered almost silently. If I wasn’t looking at him, I would’ve missed him completely. His eyes were unfocused, but he navigated his way through the tables without a sound. Maybe he came there often?

Finally, I found Yui’s email on the school server. Her friendly face in her icon made me feel a little less isolated. One of the main concerns for my parents would that I’d isolate myself, but now I could tell them about my social life without it being complete lies.

Hello Yui. It’s Elita.

I’ve found some good books on technology during WWII in the library, although I’m sure you knew that already. Actually being able to read must make the library easy for you.

I hesitated for the moment. The feeling of eyes boring into my neck like drills made me cringe, pulling the loose blazer tighter around my shoulders. When I looked around, sure that there would be nobody staring at me, my eyes met with Beret Boy’s. I wasn’t the only one looking either. The girls sat at the nearby table had their attention turned to his taller friend. A girl with brown hair blushed when the tall boy ran his hand through his grey hair. It was definitely a calculated move, not that the girls at the table cared. I shuddered.

I bumped into somebody today who said he knew you. He had dark hair and he wore a beret. He seems popular. A bunch of people looked at him and his friend (tall guy with dark hair) in the library.

Thank you. I’ll send my research soon.

Elita.

The short email left me completely exhausted. I tucked the French to Japanese dictionary back in my bag and turned the computer off. There were still four more hours of lessons to go, but already I could feel my heart thudding unevenly in my chest. The lessons were more tiring than expected.

I’d have to eat lunch after all.

Not only that.

I’d have to eat lunch on my own, in a new school, where I didn’t know where I was allowed to eat.
Things couldn’t get anymore ‘90s teen movie if they tried.

Chapter End Notes

I was so anxious before posting this it's ridiculous I have a mock exam on Ibsen and Rossetti tomorrow and I spent 20 minutes trying to figure out how HTML works lol. Anyway I hope you enjoy it (sorry if you didn't) you have a lovely day. I hope to update it soonish.
Reluctance

Chapter Summary

Rooftop biscuit fun

Chapter Notes

Biscuit=cookie for you American pals

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After being mildly traumatised in physics and maths I headed out into the hallways. Luckily numerals were the same in every language, so once I could just get down to the problems it almost felt like the academy back in France. I scanned the hallway in the delusional hope that Yui would materialise and whisk me off to a group of other friendly Yui-people. Unfortunately, I just stood in the hallway like a lemon for a few minutes until the crowds thinned. It was properly dark, so nobody would be on the roof. With a fool-proof plan, I headed up to the roof.

As soon as the wind wormed its way under my shirt and chilled me to the bone I knew I’d made the right call. Nobody in their right fucking mind would subject themselves to this chilly-ass weather. I walked around the corner of the building to shelter from the wind. The floor was cold, but at least it was quiet. After the loud lessons and weird people with questionable tastes in hats, the whistling of the wind was a welcome sound. Reluctantly, I brought out my little box of salad, and my even smaller box of raisins. The food felt heavy in my hands, and I’d started to salivate at the sight of the dull leaves.

I was so fucking hungry.

No, I wasn’t hungry. I didn’t need food. Other people needed food, but I didn’t.

My stomach protested with that. I slowly opened the box of raisins. I poked my slim finger through the hole in the top of the box and singled out a smaller raisin. Never before had a tiny, wrinkled grape looked so appetising and so disgusting at the same time. The numbers reeled off in my head.

One mini box of raisins- 14kcal

I chewed the raisin until it was mush, then I chewed it until it was liquid in my mouth.

After swallowing I took a deep breath. One raisin down. That wouldn’t be enough, would it? Food was sick and heavy, but it was fuel as well. My brain needed the glucose, and I didn’t want to be taken back. It took long enough to persuade my family that being away from Paris would make me better.

So busy reminiscing, I didn’t notice the quiet footsteps headed towards me. Really, I needed to work on my observational skills. I jumped so hard seeing Beret Boy that I jolted the box of raisins, and they rained down around me. Knowing that I couldn’t protect a single shred of dignity, I
straight-up stared at him as he sat down opposite me. He was still quiet though, his eyes not focused on anything particular.

Hypocritically, I asked, “Aren’t you going to eat something?” I didn’t move. I was tired, and it didn’t seem like Beret Boy was going to do anything, even if he was a bit creepy. Well, not a bit, a lot. I’d never know anyone move around so quietly. It was almost ghostly.

He took a while to respond. I could almost see his mind whirring at the question, and his eyes lit up and focused slightly. Shaking his head, Beret Boy looked down at my raisins, “No…I think I left it at home…”

I waited for a moment to see if he would continue before holding out the small box. His eyes flickered between my face and unsteady hand.

“Open your palm,” I said. Once he complied (his arms were covered in bandages, and the taste of bile flooded my mouth) I shook the box. The last of the raisins fell into his palm. I was more than happy to let him finish off that part of my lunch. I could feel the awkward corner of the tuppaware digging into my side, jutting against the fabric of the bag. I’d save it for later so I wouldn’t have to make more for the rabbits.

Beret Boy was slowly making his way through the raisins. His face, completely dull before, now seemed the tiniest bit more awake. The silence was still odd and heavy, making my heart pound against my ribs. Something in me was screaming to run away from him.

“What’s your name?”

His slow talking made my own hesitance seem less obvious.

“Mukami….Azusa.”

He didn’t ask, but social obligations made my big mouth open.

“I’m DuVal Elita.”

Nodding, I leaned back against the wall of the building a little more. At this point I was completely chilled, and my fingers were beginning to prickle in the cold. (Reminder- wear two tops under uniform). Azusa didn’t seem to mind the cold though, and kept on eating his raisins. I was watching his careful fingers lift them to his mouth (living vicariously through others) and I spotted something in his mouth. It was pearly white, and there was only a glimpse of it, but it made my heart pound.

Was he eating raisins and chewing gum at the same time? What a savage. Although he wasn’t chewing when he came in, was he? My memory had the consistency of mushy banana- no, not food- of chewed up paper. I lowered my head, scrunching my eyes shut. I hated to admit it, but it was all a bit overstimulating.

“You need something… to eat.”

My head snapped up at the voice. I flicked through the rolladex of excuses in my head before he cut me off absentmindedly.

“You’re blood gets weak…”

Well.

He wasn’t wrong.
Azusa reached into his pocket, frowning slightly as he fished around for something. Maybe it was a knife so he could do us both a favour and end my part in this food discussion. It was still more comfortable than the talks at home, which were distinctly tainted with disappointment and irritation. A girl who worried about her weight is fine, but one that stops eating at all? Ridiculous.

There was a tiny biscuit in his hand. The very sight of it made me curl tighter into myself and salivate simultaneously. It was everything forbidden. It was probably my imagination, but I could smell an intense, spicy smell.

Now it was his turn to hold it out. I faltered. If I didn’t take it, it would look rude, and I didn’t want to make enemies with somebody so unapologetically creepy. Shakily, I held my hand out the slightest bit. I didn’t have time to process it before it was over, but I felt a cold hand tug my wrist closer and the slight weight of the biscuit in my hand. He seemed completely unshaken though, and just watched me.

I put on my best smile (A for effort, U for performance) and lifted the baked treat to my lips. I could smell the spices for real this time. Was it gingerbread? I hadn’t had them since I was little-men in suits and gingerbread girls in tutus, half as fragile as the real thing.

Trying to hide my obvious terror at the tiny little biscuit in front of me, I took the smallest bite possible. Immediately the flavour made my eyes widen. It was the spiciest biscuit in the entire fucking planet. Whoever made these went down to Satan, exfoliated his crusty feet, and sprinkled the dead skin into the flour.

But… I liked it. I’d always used spices to stop me from eating too much. The burning pain in my mouth and stomach made sure my body remembered that eating wasn’t a good thing. Even if my mouth liked the taste, my insides rejected whatever it was, and reminded me why I avoided eating in the first place. I chewed the biscuit until the fine, crumbly texture turned into mush in my mouth. Azusa was still looking at me.

Finally, I swallowed. It felt huge in my throat, like swallowing a slug. It begged to be taken out of my stomach at once, before it infected my bloodstream and stayed in my tissues forever.

“Thank you. You, uh, you must like spicy things,” I commented, not moving to take another bite. No matter how tempting it was, it wasn’t worth the inevitable guilt.

Azusa nodded, a tiny smile on his face, “Yeah… Ruki makes them for me…”

Again, this Ruki guy. Obviously it was his brother or something, unless Azusa just had really caring friends.

He’d brought out another biscuit and proceeded to pop it into his mouth. Obviously he wasn’t fazed by the intense flavour. I took another bite of the biscuit, pinching my side hard at the same time. Remember.

Food hurts.

My eyes flickered to his bandaged wrists again. Come to think of it, he was practically covered in bandages. They were wound securely around his neck (not too tight, but tight enough to hold in place) and huge loops of gauze hung from underneath his school blazer. Had he gotten into an accident recently? Maybe that was why he spoke so slowly, he was still recovering.

I shook my head to myself, slipping the rest of the biscuit into my breast pocket while Azusa was too focused on his own sugary snacks. There was no bruising, and he moved like he wasn’t hurt at all. The scar crossing the bridge of his nose looked old. It wasn’t read, just slightly off the porcelain white his undamaged skin was.
“You haven’t finished…” He said suddenly, looking at my pocket. I froze. Shit. Did he see me? No, surely not, I had my eye on him the entire time. Slowly, Azusa tilted his head, like he was trying to read my expression better, “You should eat… your blood will get bad.”

What did he say?

I flipped through my mental dictionary of words. Damn, I knew I wasn’t ready to talk to random people.

“My juice will go bad?”

Now he looked confused. Once again, Mr Beret crossed the line between his personal space and mine and took hold of my wrist, turning it so it was face up. His cool fingers tugged my sleeve down, and pressed against the dull blue vein running back to my heart. Although his grip was hardly there, there was something behind it, the threat of further force. Despite his slight stature, it felt like Azusa could snap my arm in half.

“Blood… in there…” Azusa trailed off, still holding onto my wrist. His grip got a little tighter, just enough to make me panic. Hastily I tugged my wrist out of his grip and grabbed the strap of my bag. The sudden movement made my head go fuzzy and little flecks of light dance around the edge of my vision. I steadied myself against the wall for a moment, jumping when I felt Azusa step closer. His hand reached into my breast pocket (good thing my fat had wasted away long ago, leaving me as flat as the boy before me) and fished out the unfinished half of the biscuit.

“Sorry Elita-san… for shocking you…”

It was pressed into my hand once again. The instinct not to get strangled on the school roof overrode my disgust, and I pushed the treat into my mouth, chewing roughly and quickly. IT SEEMED LIKE I WOULDN’T BE ABLE TO LEAVE UNTIL DINNER LADY MUKAMI SAID I COULD.

I finished the whole thing and smiled weakly, “Thank you, Azusa-kun. I have to go now. I’m sorry.”

Despite how obvious it was that I was held against my will, he seemed genuinely pleased. He smiled again, “I’ll bring more…tomorrow.”

Awkwardly, I ducked under his arm and headed as quickly to the door as possible without straight-up running. It was like when somebody was walking behind you, and you wanted to get away from them as quickly as possible without showing it.

It was a relief to be back in my flat. Luckily, the rest of the day passed without incident, and I walked home undisturbed under the lightening sky. It was even colder than before, but it meant there were less people out on the streets. As soon as I was inside I dead-locked the door and dumped my bag on the floor. It wasn’t as noticeable when I was focused on schoolwork, but my shoulders ached with every movement. Grimm and Gloom bounded towards me from the balcony. Seeing them instantly made me forget the troubles of the day. I reached into my bag and brought out the un-opened lunch box.

“I have a treat for you guys~”

I dumped the salad on a plate and put it on the floor. They followed my feet excitedly, standing on their hind-legs to better sniff their food. Finally I stopped teasing them and put the plate on the
floor before flopping down onto bed myself. It was so tempting to just not do anything, but I knew that I wouldn’t get up early to do work. Consequently, if my grades slipped, I’d be sent back to Paris.

Death seemed preferable.

Groaning, I reached to the floor and picked up my laptop. If I got the research done, I could ask one of the lecturers for help translating…

As soon as I logged on my Skype dinged. Somebody had actually messaged me? Must be some malicious prank by the government.

Nope, just my family.

My little sisters had sent me a picture of them in ballet class, their legs high on the bar, their toes pointed, smiles so wide they threatened to split their faces. Even now they were 13, the whole ‘creepy twins’ feeling never wore off. I sent them a short message back. It felt good to write in my own language again.

Elita: Liking the form guys :p Make sure to stretch. Love you

Their legs were stick thin. Jealousy crept through my brain and I pushed it back. I’d been in that position once. I’d laced up those shoes before.

I opened up the second message to distract myself from the ugly thoughts in my head. It was from my older brother. His was much more to the point- the trademark of somebody too busy reading old ass books for his dissertation to spend much time online.

Jean: Make sure you’re eating.

I felt a little guilty.

Elita: You know me, I always eat

Closing the tab, I deflated a little. I opened the internet to start my research before I could think too hard. For a few hours I did research for the project (mostly figures- easier to translate) until the sun was shining into the room. Exhausted, I shut my laptop and gently put it down on the floor. The rabbits had flopped down next to me, their hind-legs splayed out behind them. They were completely relaxed. I felt reluctant to move and disturb them, but I wanted to stretch so badly.

As delicately as I could manage, I hopped off of the bed and into the bathroom. Even though Gloom and Grim didn’t give a shit whether I was naked or not, it felt weird to get undressed in their bunny eyesight. I peeled my clothes off and pulled on my old hoodie and sleeping shorts. It was baggy enough not to remind me of how completely disgusting I was.

My head was pounding from the effort of moving. Still thinking of the biscuit at lunch, my hands reluctantly reached out to the bunch of bananas resting on the counter- not in a fruit bowl, no time for that- and broke one of them off. I lined up my medication alongside the banana. Three pills, two a light blue and one dark red. I gingerly peeled back the banana peel, like merely touching the pale fruit would make me gain a kilo. The feeling of the mush in my mouth made me want to gag. I ignored the thoughts racing through my head and swallowed the three pills along with a gulp of water. Without the food, the burning sensation would keep me up.

What a pathetic excuse.

I brushed my teeth and laid out my uniform as energetically as I could muster, trying to burn up as many of the calories leaking into me as possible before heading to bed. The rabbits were still
stretched out, only being disturbed when I pulled back the cover and slid into bed. Quickly, Gloom resettled by my chest. I reached up automatically to stroke her plush black fur. Something nudged my elbow, and Grimm flopped down next to Gloom, closer to my face. His ears tickled my nose.

The day flicked through my brain in pictures. Yui politely pointing out a character I had gotten wrong. Azusa and the tall boy walking through the library.

Azusa reaching into my pocket.

His wrists were bandaged pretty well. Either he had a lot of experience, or somebody else had done it for him. Was he as ill as I was? For some reason, I didn’t fully realise that other sick people existed outside of the competitive environment of the dance studios, or the clinical halls of the hospital.

“The whole situation is fucked, isn’t it li’l buns?”

Their ears tilted towards me before returning to their normal position once they’d established that I wasn’t offering them food. I really wanted to believe that they loved me back, but it was undeniable that their affection was partially motivated by food. At least it was better than other people using you for something.

My eyelids were so heavy. The duvet was reassuringly heavy on my skin. Grimm’s ears twitched and tickled my face. It was hard to talk to people, and I did feel out of place, but the move was good for me. I didn’t have anyone nagging at me to eat, and I could sleep without worrying about my parents digging through my wardrobe to check for razors or laxatives or whatever other instruments of self-destruction I was hoarding in their imagination.

Not that they were wrong.

Finally, my mind was silenced by sleep, the final thoughts of counted calories flickering through my brain.

Chapter End Notes

I managed to only eat half a slice of cheese on toast for tea. Savour these times when I update regularly because it's exam season coming up. I hope you all liked it, comment and stuff if you want, and have a good evening.
At some point during the day, one of the rabbits had spotted something of more interest across the room, and used my stomach as a springboard. I curled up slightly, blindly patting around the bed for the other, peaceful bunny. Apparently they’d managed to hop off without being obnoxious. I could see the dull red of the daylight seeping through my eyelids. Since it was so bright it was safe to assume I didn’t have to be up for a long while.

It felt good to lay around in bed. My alarm was still set, so I was free to drift in and out of consciousness until the time came to pull my uniform on and head to school. I ignored the cramping in my stomach and stretched my legs, pointing my feet and then flexing them.

Now, first position…

What time was it in Paris? I glanced at the clock beside the bed reluctantly. 4pm, so… 9am in France. The twins had probably finished their ballet class by now- an hour of stretching and an hour of bar class- and would be heading off to school. Dancing used to give me energy for the school day, but towards the end it felt like my heart would burst out of my chest at the slightest exertion. Going up the stairs ended in palpitations, and eventually I wasn’t allowed to go to the morning classes anymore…

I shook my head, tugging the duvet closer to me in large handfuls. It was for the best. I was never good enough to be a dancer, and everyone liked thin girls. Everything looked good on thin girls. The plies and the pointed feet were all useless to me now. I was celestial.

Well, more celestial than before.

Even lying in bed, the weight of the fat clinging to my body felt gross. The ligaments thinned at my joints, sagging under the weight of my bloated cells. The longer I lay in bed, the more I was disgusted with myself. It never stopped. It never would, not until I lost enough weight.

Finally I gathered the energy to sit up in bed. There was a stack of workbooks on the table along with several wrinkled novels from trying to shampoo my hair and read simultaneously. The spines were cracked and worn. My phone had slipped between the bed and the bedside table. With a little effort I wormed my spider-like hand down the gap and got hold of the device. I really didn’t use it enough considering how it had been a condition of leaving. I needed to be contactable at all times. The thought of talking to people who knew how I was back then still made me uncomfortable.

They would be talking about me more than ever, about my rolls and dimpled flesh…

The phone was on low battery, and the dim screen showed Mum had texted me the night before. I tapped in the passcode and replied, assuring her that I wasn’t sold into the sex industry.

I went onto the school internet and typed out my email slowly. It was easier knowing nobody was watching me and judging my shaky hands.

Yui had replied.

*Hello Elita.*

*That’s great! The library is big, so it can be hard to find just what you’re looking for. Research is*
going okay, but I have to do it at school. My housemates make it hard to study. They’re very boisterous :)

I think you’re talking about Azusa Mukami. He’s very friendly and kind. I assume the taller boy was his brother Ruki. He’s very clever, but quite strict.

Have a nice evening :) I’ll see you tomorrow

Yui

I looked at the timestamp on the email, and surely enough, it was sent just after school had finished. Were her housemates that bad? Maybe she’d moved from somewhere else like me and wanted some company at home. I didn’t reply since I’d be seeing her that morning. Slowly I got up, trying to ignore the flecks of white in the corner of my vision as I moved. Since it was so early I headed to the bathroom to shower. Usually I couldn’t be bothered until I looked visibly disgusting, but I had extra time anyway. My skin broke out in goose pimples as soon as I entered the bathroom despite the thick hoodie I had on. Scraping the towels off of the floor, I got everything ready for when I would get out.

Dim recognition at the face in the mirror.

She had the same, thin dark hair as me (it came out in clumps in the shower), the same high cheekbones and dark eyes (bulging compared to the bruised, thin skin around them) and pasty white skin. I tilted my head, letting the blue light of the bathroom enhance the shadows underneath my collar bones and jaw.

I wasn’t pretty. Not in the face.

The vague impressions of my ribs on my chest were though. At least I wasn’t as fat or as ugly as before.

The heat of the shower steamed up the mirror until I could no longer stare at the person looking back at me. I gently washed my hair, trying not to pull out any more on top of what came out easily between my fingers. My thighs stung in the hot water and soapy trails leaking from the shampoo. Nothing looked infected though, which was always a plus.

As soon as I stepped out I swaddled myself with a towel and began to dry myself. The mirror was still fogged up. My pasty skin nearly blended into the tiles behind me.

Heh

No reflection. I’d be craving blood and running away from garlic bread soon enough.

After combing through my hair I pulled on the same hoodie and shorts as before and headed out onto the balcony. The sunlight made me wince. I’d gotten so used to sleeping through the day that seeing the sky so blue felt wrong. Gloom and Grimm hopped around my feet excitedly, their sides brushing against my ankles. Crouching down, I tried to pet both of the excitable animals at once, smiling as the hopped around me like little cultists around their malnourished deity.

My stocks of greens were getting low, and I liked to spend my time away from other people. Maybe I could go and sneakily pick some grass from the park after school. Nobody would mind if I helped trim down the hedges, right? It would be hard to talk myself out of trouble with the language barrier though.
A small, wet tongue brushed against my knees, bringing me back to my senses. Groom was busily grooming the grossly long hairs on my legs. My loathsome lanugo. It made me look like a werewolf. Back when I did dance I’d spend hours meticulously shaving my legs and arms and stomach, ironically trying not to nick my raised scars with the razor as I did so.

I sat outside, thumbing through one of my old books until the sky was coral pink and the rabbits were heading back outside to escape from the cold. It hurt to get up- the cold had worked all the way through into my bones. My hands were speckled purple and an odd orange colour from the cold.

I got dressed quickly to get warm. Another top was added underneath my uniform. After preparing breakfast for the rabbits, I was about to leave when I remembered my words to Bere- no, Azusa. Would he actually hold me to my offer? Back in Paris people said stuff like that all the time and people just assumed that it wasn’t serious. I grabbed a pack of raisins.

Walking as quickly as I could to burn off the lunch I’d inevitably have to eat before the calories had even absorbed, I barely noticed the sky turning darker and the streetlights flickering on. It was clearer than the night before, and the wind wormed underneath my jumper, chilling me.

The morning passed by in a flash. I sat in my literature class with my workbooks until the teacher came, analysed poetry once the class was full and loud, and discussed the ethics of using stem cells in biology. It was hard to keep up with the chatter, and I kept quiet unless I was called on, but at least I didn’t want to stand out. I didn’t want to be noticed. I didn’t want anyone to have any lasting idea of me, any false image that would eventually disappoint them.

I had history after lunch, and I didn’t feel like I knew Yui well enough to seek her out. Where would I even find her? Did she have a group of friends she hung out with in the canteen, or did she belong to some club? Maybe that was why the tall boy had come to ‘fetch’ her. Looking round such a big school was pointless, and my shoulders were already aching from my heavy school bag. The stairs up to the roof seemed steeper than before. Stopping in front of the door, I considered just turning back and heading to the classroom early. Azusa probably wasn’t serious, and if I stayed up there waiting I’d have to eat some more of those biscuits.

Finally the fear of Azusa sneaking up on me standing in front of the door and just staring at it overcame the reluctance to talk with the quiet boy again without getting spooked. As soon as I opened the door, the cold wind rushed towards me.

The roof was quiet save for the rushing of the wind, which had gotten wilder during the two periods spent in class. I turned the corner, and was surprised to find Azusa sat with his back against the wall, the bandages around his wrist unwound. They brushed the floor when Azusa’s gentle fingers disturbed them.

I stopped uncertainly, looking back towards the door. Maybe I made a mistake?

“Ah, Elita-san…”

My head whipped back round. Azusa’s eyes flickered from my confused face to the long cut running down his pale wrist. Unlike the scar on his nose, the one running the length of his forearm did not look healed well. It was still pink, and the seam holding the two sides of skin together was scabbing over.

“Are you making sure it’s clean, Azusa-san?” I asked, trying not to seem too phased by what was happening. I knew how embarrassing it was to be found like that.

He shook his head, “I was just… talking to Justin…”
I looked around the rooftop. I didn’t see anyone coming down the stairs, and the only way down other than that was straight off of the roof to the pavement below. My mind rattled back to the unit.

“Is he here?”

He looked up at me like I was being silly, “Right here, Elita-san…” His pale hand gestured towards the cut running down his wrist. His voice was quiet but firm. Obviously, he either didn’t know or didn’t care that other people might find his talk weird. Instead of turning tail and running, like most reasonable people, I dumped my bag on the ground and sat a foot to his left, peering at the wound. Azusa tilted his wrist slightly towards me.

“Has Justin been here for long?”

After a moments pause Azusa shook his head slowly, beginning to wind the bandages back around ‘Justin’.

“This Justin isn’t new… the first Justin is even older.”

I nodded. Being completely honest, I didn’t want to ask anymore. I didn’t know Azusa well enough to pry into his private life, and he never asked about mine.

I brought out the little box of raisins and tipped it into his palm. I waited until only a few were left in the cardboard container before withdrawing it. It felt good to hear the hollow rattle of the sole survivor bouncing around inside. At least I wouldn’t be scoffing down a box of raisins and a biscuit like a bear going into hibernation.

We ate silently for a moment, Azusa popping two or three of the snacks into his mouth at a time while I chewed mine into liquid mush and considered spitting it back out into a tissue. He then pulled two biscuits out of his pocket and passed one to me. The treat seemed more and less threatening simultaneously. I knew I wouldn’t balloon up from it, but at the same time I knew how I could devour thousands of them in one setting.

Slowly, I nibbled around the edge of the biscuit. The quiet was a welcome change to the chatter of the classroom.

I was counting up just how long I’d have to walk to burn off my lunch when Azusa piped up. His eyes were back on his rebound wrist.

“What’s precious to you… Elita-san?”

“Hm?”

Directing attention away from the biscuit, I looked over at Azusa.

I had my rabbits, and my family. Even if I couldn’t dance anymore I could still draw and paint when I had the energy to.

“I have two rabbits. They’re very important to me. My family is too.”

Really I knew I was lucky. I was lucky to have enough money to go to hospital, but I was unlucky enough to get caught. I was lucky that I’d collapsed at home when other people were around, but unlucky that I hadn’t just died. I would’ve been buried, and then worms and maggots would have eaten away at my flesh until just the bones were left. Clean and white in the filth.

“What’s precious to you, Azusa-kun?”

Azusa tilted his head a little, like he was expecting the bandages from a different angle, like he was looking for something that at the edge of his vision.
“My brothers…. Melissa… Justin… And Christina…. My collection is precious too…”

Collection?

“What do you collect?”

“Friends… I’ll show you.”

He seemed positively cheery. A little smile was on his face, and he’d stopped staring at his wrist to look at me. The vague response did make me feel a little uneasy, but before I could ask anymore questions his gaze had drifted to the forgotten biscuit in my hand.

Moving faster than I knew was possible for him, he took the biscuit from my fingers and pressed it against my lips. Instinctively I reached up to slap his wrist away, but his arm didn’t budge. I looked at his thin wrist. I was weak (sacrificing my muscle to get rid of the fat that clung to me was a sacrifice I was willing to make) but he was thin too, and his hand hadn’t shifted an inch.

I turned my head and opened my mouth to protest when the sweet taste of cinnamon and the heat of whatever spices Ruki put in there invaded my senses. Like a rabbit in the headlights I froze, petrified. I hadn’t wanted it in my mouth, I wasn’t ready for it how many times would I chew it what would I do couldn’t I spit it out it was so so sweet on my tongue I salivated like I hadn’t tasted food in years-

“Elita-san, your blood… gets thin if you don’t eat,” Azusa murmured like it was a decent excuse for fouling my clean insides with the sweet. My baby pink intestines would be coated in crumbs and brown slime. It would leech into my muscles and my liver and choke my tiny heart in strings of pus and fill my lungs with oil.

No

I couldn’t freak out.

My chest was heaving, but I began to chew. My teeth struggled against the crumbly biscuit despite my saliva having softened it. The enzymes in my spit were already breaking the sugars down, passing them into my greedy blood. My implant felt odd against the pressure. It was stronger than my actual teeth.

I was brushing my teeth and the foam I’d spat out bright pink against the white of the sink basin. Feeling the teeth wobble against the force of my tongue, I’d gone to my parents. The twins followed me, asking why my mouth looked so gross.

It fell out not long after.

The dentist said it was dehydration, and the doctor said it was the tissues holding the root in its soft bed of gum wasting away like the rest of me.

I didn’t care.

It was disgusting and rotten anyway.

Azusa watched as I swallowed the biscuit. I fought the tears welling up in the eyes at the thought of it staying in my tissues forever.

“I’m sorry…”

Slowly I looked over at him. As much as I furiously blinked, my eyes were just as wet as before. After hastily rubbing my eyes with my blazer sleeve, I properly looked up at his face. He looked… uncomfortable. His doe eyes seemed more sad than usual.
“Don’t do it again. Please.”

I sounded like a child who didn’t want to eat their vegetables before eating pudding.

Slowly, Azusa shook his head, “I won’t… if you eat it yourself… Elita-san.”

Biting down hard on the inside of my cheeks, I tried to pick up my bag and stand at the same time, falling back against the wall as my head swam and my blood drained down to my feet. Azusa looked up at me, still sad.

“You won’t be around… for your precious ones.”

My throat was already thick from the biscuit earlier, and hearing what the doctors had always told me from somebody who wasn’t paid to make me fat made me want to vomit. I tried to open my mouth, to argue that it was no business of others what I did with my own body, and that if they really loved me then they’d accept me regardless, but no words came out. Having gathered my strength, I headed towards warm light pooling from the door. I ignored the eyes boring into my back.

I felt colder than ever.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, I hope you guys enjoyed it! Hopefully I’m doing Azusa justice. I always get worried about portraying canon characters properly. I'm getting stress nightmares because of exams RIP

Be safe today and enjoy yourself.
I ignored the uncomfortable lump in my throat and walked as quickly as I could between the groups of people chatting in the hallways to distract myself. The biscuit was already hanging off of my thighs, making my face hot. Who did he think he was, putting that shit in my mouth? Who touched people without their permission?
The fact that it’d been a pleasant lunch until Azusa managed to guilt me for not eating and make me mad simultaneously only made me more upset. I hesitated in front of the door to the history room and peeked through the small window in the door. Yui was already in, and it wouldn’t be fair to ditch and leave her alone in class no matter how shitty I was feeling.

She was some kind of mind reader. Despite my best efforts to look as neutral and mildly-tired as possible (standard issue for seventeen year olds going to a night school) her face creased with concern immediately. Seeing her concerned only made my shitty mood get worse, and it took a lot not to wail like a baby as I clumsily slid my bag under the table and sat down next to her. Warm fingertips gently rested on my balled-up hand.

“Elita-san, what’s wrong?” Yui asked, tilting her head slightly to get a better look at my crunched up face. Her fingers were practically burning hot compared to the cold wind outside, and involuntarily I shifted my hand away.

What if she felt the fat packed around my palm, sheathing my fingers.

I tried to open my mouth and say I was ok, or that I’d run across campus, or any other conceivable lie to make her not worry, but no words came out. After a moment I tried again, and my voice came out in a choked sob.

“I don’t fucking want to eat.”

Yui looked at me for a moment, even more confused for a moment. She looked up at the door, debating in her head whether she should go and get the lecturer.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” she replied to me gently. Her warm, kind eyes made me feel a little better, and I was able to pull myself together enough to realise that I had just spoken in French, and my friend was probably worrying that I was losing contact with reality. Realising that rumours of the new kid sobbing in class wouldn’t help with my reputation at school, I took a deep breath in and exhaled shakily.

Really, I knew that I wasn’t mad at Azusa. He was right. My sick brain, deprived of energy, hated that he’d been able to fucking read me like a book after I’d spent years lying to my parents and my friends and anyone else that so much as glanced my way. I shouldn’t be that surprised- I’d seen the gigantic cut running down his arm. He was probably as much of a liar as I was.

The warm hand moved to my back, gently resting between my shoulder blades. Would she press hard enough to feel the individual knobs of a spine, each one a badge to honour my dedication? I was wearing five layers, so they wouldn’t feel too defined. I managed a shaky laugh and looked up at her, rubbing the corner of my wet eyes with my sleeve.

“I’m sorry. I just had a weird time at lunch.”
“What happened?” She was so concerned, and I felt a rush of gratitude. No matter how many times I convinced myself that I was better off isolated from everyone, it was nice to be treated like an actual person.

Knowing that chatting shit about a seemingly popular boy would land me in shit, I thought back to the emails the night before. It would be easier too, since my vocabulary wasn’t exactly incredible. "The young dark brother sat with me. He made me sad. He didn’t want to," I tried to explain without straight up saying what had happened. I didn’t need Yui along with Azusa shoving food down my mouth. Hell, if they teamed up they could probably improvise a feeding tube to shove up my nose.

She frowned slightly and nodded, rubbing small circles onto my back, “I know he can be a bit odd. He’s trying hard, maybe you should tell him why he upset you. I haven’t heard of him sitting with somebody other than his brothers for a while.2 Knowing that I wasn’t in top form anyway, Yui spoke slowly and clearly, finding ways to explain words when I didn’t recognise them. The class was filling up, and the chatter and Yui’s kind words helped ground me. Soon, a snuffy nose was the only reminder of the little episode I’d had.

I grabbed the research I’d done (it’d taken me a while to translate the French to Japanese, and the kanji were shaky but readable) and put it on the table. The very act of nudging the various textbooks and papers aside made my arm ache from the effort. Maybe is my arm wasn’t swathed in fat it wouldn’t be so hard to move it around.

Her smile lit up the room. “That’s amazing Elita-san! You translated this all yourself?” She asked, her eyes brighter than before. It made me happy to know that I wasn’t worrying her anymore. From the sounds of it her roommates didn’t let her relax much at home, and I felt bad enough making her stressed out at school.

I was about to ask what her roommates did that made things so shitty when the teacher came in, and every student in the room sat up straight. The sudden change in atmosphere seemed to lock the events of lunch in a little box for me to open at a time of convenience.

We managed to put together the basic structure of our presentation before the time was up. English class wasn’t far away, so I put my books in my bag a little more slowly than usual. My heart was fluttering in my chest, and I knew if I exerted myself it’d turn into a full-fledged palpitation. Yui looked over at me, tucking her blonde hair out of her face.

“I hope you feel better and have a restful evening, Elita-san. We got a lot done today.”

I nodded slowly, smiling up at her, “You too. I hope your roommates are…better.”

She glanced towards the door before leaning closer, her smile slightly mischievous now, “So do I. I don’t know if I can spend another day making takoyaki endlessly.”

I snickered, “Do they do the washing up after?”

Yui shook her head, running a finger down her cheek in a mock-tear motion, “It is my burden to bear.”

Shooting her another smile, I waved goodbye to my friend, making my way to English. I was still pretty shaken up, but at least I had a decent class before going out to the park. The folded tote bag inside my backpack would help me carry the bundles of grass home. Nothing looked weirder than wondering the streets with handfuls of grass.

Luckily, English passed without incident, and I was walking past my house to the unkempt hedges fencing in the park. It was almost sunrise, and the sky in the East was tinted pink. The streetlights
were still on, making my pasty skin seemingly glow in the dim early morning light. The park was quiet. Occasionally a bird would trill loudly, awaiting a reply from across the park. The swing-set and roundabout seemed oddly ominous. It was completely still, and soon the sound of tearing was the only human sound in the air. Carefully I avoided the brambles and nettles, but it was hard to tell in the darkness. I felt too conspicuous turning the light on my phone on- the thought of being watched made me shudder.

The bottom of my tote bag was getting damp from the morning dew on the plants, and it was getting uncomfortable. The sleeves of my blazer were also soaked, and the prospect of walking across the field and back home seemed especially unappealing. I was contemplating just staying in that very spot to avoid mild discomfort (bonus- hard to binge when there’s no food around) when the familiar sound of tearing sounded from a while away. It was easier to see now the sun was rising in the sky, but I still had to squint at the figure on the other side of the field.

The stranger was also pulling at the hedge, although it was a little more careless than my actions. Already they had a considerable amount of plant matter tucked under their arm. I immediately felt anxious. No matter the circumstances, it felt weird being alone in a field with some stranger. Deciding to abandon my search, I headed across the damp grass towards the gate. I looked back to where the stranger had been, only to find… nothing. A sparrow rattled off a sharp alarm call, making my head snap back to the gate.

There must be another entrance over there that I didn’t know about. Yeah. They’d just left the park and gone home, like I was going to-

“No! Elita-san…”

I jumped feet, slipping on the wet grass, only just managing to get my balance back and prevent a humiliating fall. I must’ve looked like an especially uncertain fawn. Trying to get a shred of my dignity back, I bit the inside of my cheek hard. I needed to focus.

First, it was pretty obvious that Azusa had been the one tearing away at the plants. A bundle seemingly bigger than his entire torso was tucked under his hands. My assumption that the stranger wasn’t careful was right- his hands were covered in pinpricks of blood and angry lumps where he’d grasped nettles.

I didn’t even know where to start.

“Why are you out here?”

It came out way sharper than I wanted it to, but I reminded myself that he’d polluted me with that fucking biscuit.

Azusa took a moment to answer. His eyes seemed to say ‘why do you think I’m here’, but his actual response was…. Odder.

“I came to help pick plants…”

I frowned. Did I mention that? I did my best to think back to that afternoon. We’d spoken about ‘precious things’ before he made me eat. Was it possible I mentioned it then? I really didn’t remember saying that, no matter how hard I tried. My brain was already making excuses. How else did he get here? Follow you? Do you really think you wouldn’t notice him following you all the way down here?

Looking at the gigantic bundle, I tried to organise my thoughts, “Uhm, well…thank you.” It was clear that I was doubtful, but Azusa either didn’t notice or didn’t find it important enough to react.
It was clear that the bundle wasn’t going to fit in my tote bag, and the idea of carrying it home myself didn’t appeal either.

Trying to change the focus of the conversation, I asked, “Did you hurt your hands?”

Nodding, Azusa smiled like he was in a daze, “Yes… the thorns pricked me… and the insects bit…”

His hands weren’t bleeding that badly, but the whole tone of the situation made my stomach curl. Somehow, assuming that Azusa cut himself and named his favourite scars was less odd that deliberately pulling on thorns.

Maybe he’d fall asleep for a hundred years, and the same thorns would encase him until it was time.

I looked for the right words in my head, and uncertainly said, “Are they… not dirty?”

Azusa looked at his palms and shrugged, clearly not interested, “They could be…cleaner…”

The sun was peeking over the horizon, and I made a snap decision, “Come with me to my house. We can clean your hands.”

He nodded, “Yes, Elita-san…”

As we walked home, the odd feeling in my stomach that everything had played out just how he wanted made me feel nauseous. I paused momentarily outside of my building, but failed to come up with some excuse. Even if I did, I doubted that Azusa would take any notice.

The steps up to my floor seemed harder with somebody who blatantly didn’t struggle was right on my heels. Determined to control my breathing, I limited myself. Two steps, one breath. Finally, we made it up to the door, and I awkwardly unlocked it and kicked off my shoes.

The rabbits raced in, smelling the fresh grass. They were going mad, darting between my feet, and then between Azusa’s. He watched them, enthralled by their dumbass antics.

I headed over to the balcony door and opened it, motioning for Azusa to dump the grasses outside. He did so, smiling as the rabbits excitedly searched through the leaves, no-doubt smelling one that had 1% more glucose than the rest.

I grabbed an antiseptic wipe from my medicine box (conveniently left to the box of razors and diuretics bought from a shady person in a car park) and handed it to Azusa. He took it and stared at it for a moment before rubbing it over his palms. I knew from experience how much they stung when they came into contact with cuts, but Azusa was still cleaning with that slight smile on his face. There was still a large thorn sticking from his palm. The sight of it made me cringe, and without thinking, I pulled it out of his palm.

Quickly his head whipped up to look at me.

“That hurt…”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Azusa-kun.”

His eyes seemed to gleam in the low light, “Thank you, Elita-san…”

I looked up at him, and our eyes locked for a few long seconds. Something in his expression made my heart race, and I instinctively took a step away from him. The thorn was still clasped between my thumb and index finger.
He reached into his pocket, and pulled out two of the spice biscuits (to match the one swimming through my blood).

“Take these…”

Idly, Azusa pointed to the boxes on the counter. He probably knew that most meds needed food to be taken with them, and obviously I didn’t fucking have any I felt stupid for snapping, and reached to touch the (delicious) disgusting biscuits. I was putting them on the counter next to the stack of boxes (just for show- I’d flush them down the toilet so I could be safe) when I heard a whisper.

“Your scent… you need to be ready …”

Azusa looked confused when I turned back to stare at him. His eyes dulled again, and his fingers caressed his prickled palm. There was no way in hell that that was my imagination, but he didn’t seem to know what I was talking about. People usually acted sheepish when they were caught doing things that they weren’t supposed to, like commenting on your smell.

The whole situation was getting a little overwhelming for me. Somebody was in my kitchen, the very same somebody who’d made me eat and ruined my calorie plan for the day. Despite being completely passive, it felt like Azusa was in complete control of the situation. The rabbits were still out on the balcony, and his hand was clean. That was all that needed to be done.

“I have some work to do,” I began uncertainly, not sure what the customs were regarding kicking somebody out of your house.

“I can see why… your rabbits are precious,” Azusa commented dreamily, completely ignoring my comment. I just looked at the expression on his face. It wasn’t the one of somebody trying to irritate somebody else.

“They’re good,” I agreed.

My heart was pounding so loudly I was sure he could feel it. Why did I feel so unsafe?

“I’ll show you my precious things…” he continued, suddenly focusing his eyes on me. They were sad and soft, but still didn’t leave any room for disagreement.

I was about to thank him, when he cut me off.

“I’ll show you… tomorrow.”

I got in before Azusa could continue.

“It’s a school night. Don’t you need to sleep?” I asked. If I posed it as a concern about him, then I wouldn’t feel as rude, right? I wouldn’t be outright rejecting him, would I?

Slowly, he shook his head.

“I’ll see you… outside the front of the school.”

He walked back over to the door. I felt completely unable to argue. The mere prospect of coming up with an excuse seemed pointless. At this point, I was pretty sure he had some weird truth-serum perfume that made me incapable of lying around him.

I nodded, swallowing down the lump in my throat. My voice was still croaky and uncomfortable.

“Okay… I’ll see you.”
Azusa gave one last look at the two biscuits next to the pills, and then looked at me, before relaxing his face from his oddly intense look before.

“Sleep well, Elita-san.”

As soon as he was out the door I let out a choked sigh. I felt invaded for some reason. The rabbits were too preoccupied to notice me biting down hard on my clenched teeth, pressing until red crescents were dotted around the joints of my knuckles. All of my muscles were tense in a premature rigor-mortis.

I wish I was already dead.

I got up and hastily made my bag ready for the next day, sliding my sketchbook underneath it for art. It was the one lecture that set homework that didn’t make me want to die. Slipping out of the layers of clothing like a snake shedding its skin, I didn’t even look in the mirror before pulling on my pyjamas. I was afraid of seeing my bloated, disgusting stomach after the biscuit. All of my weakness was illustrated on my body.

The pink lines on my thighs and hips were punishments. Unlike Azusa’s scar, they shoaled together like tiny, rose coloured fish on the fucking oceans of my thighs.

Heading over, I punched my meds out of their packs and snapped one of the biscuits in half. It was probably less calories anyway (if the recipe was similar to the own-brand ones the supermarket sold). It didn’t have the potassium, but hopefully my heart would just give out anyway.

Pinching my arm hard, I put the biscuit on my tongue.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you lovely commenters on chapter three. You really made my day. I got this done early for you guys, I hope you enjoy it.
Stay safe
After choking down the biscuits I headed outside to the rabbits. They were still digging through the gigantic heap of leaves, smelling out the most nutritious, with the loser trying to steal the treat from the winner. So far Gloom was going the best - I could’ve sworn that she looked smug when she found a dandelion leaf. It quickly disappeared into her soft mouth, and as I watched, transfixed, the phone rang inside.

It rattled against the wood of the table, and I jumped up quickly to get it, ignoring the flecks of white clustering in the edges of my vision. Still, it wasn’t as bad as usual, and I was able to reach the phone in time.

Talking on the telephone was preferable to talking in person, but I still felt sick as I picked up the call. Only five people knew my number, and only two of them would call instead of text.

“Hello Mum,” I said. If I looked at the caller ID I’d lose my nerve, and then she’d assume I’d strung myself up from the balcony like a Christmas bauble.

She was in a taxi somewhere. The sound of the taxi driver calling somebody a fat cow, and the familiar hum of an engine made me certain. It was troublesome to have a car in a congested city like Paris, and her knees were going bad even before I went to hospital, so it wasn’t surprising.

“Good afternoon Elita,” Mum replied, directing the taxi driver when he made a wrong turn, the hand over the receiver barely muffling her instructions, “Why are you up? It’s 3am over there, isn’t it?”

Sitting down on the bed, I curled up. Even on the phone it was hard to talk to my mother. I’d made myself starve because I’d refused to inflate like a party balloon, and I was so good at it I had to get locked up.

“School just finished an hour ago, and I had to go and get some greens for Gloom and Grimm.”

I heard a quiet hum of consideration. She’d learned early on that picking your battles was important - it was troublesome to comment every time I sliced my food into microscopic pieces, or recite the rules the psychiatrists had given us about trust after I got up to get a fourth glass of water twenty minutes into the meal. The condition of me moving to Japan was a miraculous recovery, and wandering out to get food for rabbits wasn’t very ‘functional’ in her books.

“They’re being fed, but are you? You haven’t sent a picture of your weight log for a week now.”

Fuck.

The notebook had been abandoned to grow dust on the top of the bathroom cabinet. It wasn’t like I wrote the real numbers in it anyway. I didn’t need anybody else to know about my thighs or my arms or the roll of tissue around my waist that wouldn’t go no matter what I’d did. I’d managed to lose enough weight to keep the voices in my brain from eating me alive, but they waited, strings of drool dripping from their unhinged jaws.

If I wasn’t getting (better) fatter they’d rather I just died already.

Realising I’d stayed quiet, I quickly covered up the silence, “Mum, in all honestly, I left it at the
doctor’s. I’ll pick it up when I go back there this weekend.”

“Why didn’t you just send me texts with your weight?”

“You know you don’t understand text.”

“Elita.”

My tongue was heavy and sluggish. Had she been seeing that damn family therapist again? The one that handed me a crayon and asked me to circle from a selection of faces what I was feeling—she didn’t laugh when I asked where the fat smiley was. I don’t think I was joking.

“Aren’t you out late? I thought the girls had ballet practice tonight.” I tried to divert her attention away from the total failure in the family.

It worked (we both pretended it did) and Mum went into a tangent about scouts and shows and how long it took to stick rhinestones to two snow-white leotards. I nodded absentmindedly, running one hand across the lump of my ankle bone and across my foot. When I flexed my toes, the tensions rose out of my skin, creating smooth valleys between them.

Wherever Mum was going, she’d arrived. The taxi driver impatiently cleared his throat, and Mum’s purse opened.

“Send it to me after you get some sleep. Don’t forget your food diary either,” she insisted.

I snorted quietly, “Yes commander.”

“It’s not a joke.” Her voice was tinged with irritation. Obviously I didn’t take my own starvation seriously enough for her. At least she wasn’t the one calculating how many calories there were in a tube of toothpaste, or the pills that kept my self-esteem big and my arms even bigger. “Your father and I won’t hesitate to get you back here.”

“Love you too Mum.”

She sighed, and I hung up before she could start talking about ‘trust’ and honesty. Really, she knew about the fabricated figures and fictitious meals, but she didn’t want me back. Nobody did. It was better to have three perfect kids than three perfect kids and werewolf child who howled at the moon and lived on a diet of sweeteners and lettuce leaves.

100>75

The conversation was so draining that I quickly headed to bed. I stared at the clean, white porcelain of the toilet bowl, and pondered whether the biscuit crumbs were already dividing into countless fat cells. There’d be no use using laxatives- my tired intestines were already on the verge of retiring. Instead I crawled into bed and turned off the phone, letting my eyes slip shut.

The blankets were banks of snow, settling softly on my face until the world around me grew hot. No, not snow, but ash. Everything was burning, and I was buried under the debris. I tried to scream, but the ash flowed into my mouth and clogged up my lungs like mucus—

I kicked back the covers with strength I didn’t know was left in me. The room, now far darker than it was when I fell asleep, was way too hot. Before I got up I sipped at the water left by the bed, cringing at the odd taste of water that’s been out too long. The world span less, and I was able to shake my head, clearing my mind of ash and heat and awkward phone conversations.
The shower was cold and battered against my back so hard I thought it might bruise. There was no coffee or tea left (trips to the supermarket took hours as I analysed the content of every package and tin) so it was the only thing to really wake me up. My lips were blue by the time I got out of the shower; I was shaking so hard I had to wait until I warmed up to get dressed.

I didn’t see Azusa at lunch, so I huddled alone on the rooftop, jiggling my legs to burn some energy. Everything had tired me out, and by the time last period ended I just wanted to go home and crawl into my bed. I would’ve forgotten about Azusa if his family weren’t stood outside the front of the school.

There was no way they could be blood-related. Azusa was the shortest, and he was looking over to a laughing blonde, who was teasingly holding his phone away from a gigantic boy with long hair. Mr Popular watched them, rolling his eyes slightly. They all looked different, but were all unmistakably good looking. Nobody in their right mind would deny it, and that made me pause. I was still within the school building, and they hadn’t seen me yet. Pinching my wrist, I focused on the feeling of bone just under the skin as I walked out to greet the group. There was bile in my mouth.

I wasn’t the smartest or the most athletic or most popular, but I was the thinnest.

I was halfway there when Azusa spotted me and waved languidly. The blonde boy stopped waving the tall boy’s phone and gave it back to him, and they all stopped talking. It was worse than going to the doctors for a weigh-in when you know for a fact you’ve eaten a grand total of 3100 calories in the entire month. All of the carefully prepared phrases left my head. Ask them about their subjects and what they wanted to do? Nope, why not just stand there in a trance until lichen colonised my skin and turned me into a real statue.

Azusa smiled the slightest bit, the most subtle twitch of the lips detectable by human eyes, and the other three did even less than that. I could feel the bile creeping up my throat. I didn’t consider myself a shy person, but stood in front of those four boys I could feel my soul fucking off out of my body.

“Good morning, Elita-chan, struck speechless by me?” The blonde boy teased, winking. His hair completely covered his right eye, and it was full of clips with a little ponytail on the right side. It was far from practical, but his playful tone made me feel the slightest bit less uncomfortable. Obviously this wasn’t a big deal.

The tallest one snorted, “As if, she’s probably just confused that some creep is winking at her.”

Ruki (I thanked Yui mentally for helping me feel the tiniest bit less clueless) sighed, and elegantly rested his hand on his forehead, “Introduce yourself to someone before arguing with each other.”

Although he appeared exasperated, there was a hint of amusement in Ruki’s voice that made me want to get away from him. It was the voice of somebody who was two steps ahead, and eagerly awaited for the progression of the game.

Azusa was by my side before I could even process his movement, inhaling deeply. I cringed, my shoulders instinctively rising to protect my neck. His breath teased my thin, dead hair.

“You ate the biscuits…. Well done, Elita-san…”

“Azusa~ Stop being creepy, she might run off if you keep it up,” the blonde grinned again. The bracelets on his wrist jangled every time he gestured, “I’m Mukami Kou by the way, the second oldest of us here.”
The surprise must have been obvious, since the tallest of the four raised his eyebrow, “I’m Mukami Yuma, and don’t listen to the idol. He still acts like a toddler.”

I turned to look at Ruki assuming that he’d just introduce himself because that was how these things seemed to go, but instead there was a second of silence before he smiled. It wasn’t genuine; his eyes were cold.

“I’m Mukami Ruki, the oldest of us four. Excuse me, but the limousine is waiting for us, and it’s impolite to keep the school gate blocked.”

Nodding mutely, I followed the four as they turned at the same time (like some cheesy boy band video) and headed towards the crowded driveway of the school. Considering the school’s prestige it wasn’t surprising to see chauffeurs driving vintage cars just for the school run, but the Mukami’s limousine still surprised me. It was sleek and black and not even alone in the driveway. A little way down the path another black limousine waited for its passengers to board. Amongst them was Yui, and I gave her a little wave before turning back to my hosts.

It was surely my imagination, but she seemed a little…pale.

At least I was ignored on the ride to the house. There was an odd tension in the air, an unspoken agreement that I’d keep my mouth shut. Looking out of the window, I watched the scenery change from the lights of the city to the darkness of the country. I hadn’t seen so much green since the drive back from the hospital (isolated, to make it hard to hurt yourself with pills that didn’t come with paper cups of orange juice) and the woods seemed especially dark. I was surprised that they bothered to drive for so long instead of just boarding, even if they did have a chauffeur.

Their mansion made my little flat look like a pothole in the middle of the motorway, which was then filled with roadkill. The driveway was lined with elegantly trimmed topiary. Even the fountain in the centre of the front garden didn’t trickle out of time, each droplet timed perfectly.

It only made me feel more out of place with my two pairs of tights (which still had rabbit hair in, no matter how hard I tried to pick it out) and the concealed bags under my eyes. They weren’t Channel, they were the cheap ones takeaways gave you that snapped under the weight of overfilled polystyrene boxes and medication.

Once we were in the mansion everyone went their separate ways, but I still felt three pairs of eyes on me as Azusa lead me down the hall.

“I’ve been waiting to show you… my precious things,” he hummed out, running his hands across the textured wallpaper as we headed further into the house. We took so many twists and turns it was difficult to picture how we came to that point. Apparently unaware of my discomfort, Azusa continued until reaching a door. Cyan light leeched out from under it into the hallway.

Opening the door, he stepped back, allowing me to go in first. I was so transfixed with the lit glass cabinet in the corner that I didn’t register the door clicking shut.

It was full of knives.

Already at the cabinet’s side, Azusa’s smile was small and proud as he gestured towards his collection. Everything else in the room seemed non-descript and anonymous, but the cabinet was obviously well taken care of. Not a single greasy fingerprint marred the glass front, giving a flawless view into what was inside.

The magpie in me took over at the sight of such gigantic jewels embedded in the intricately
patterned handles, and I stepped forwards towards the cabinet. Now I was closer I could focus on each individual one.

Azusa seemed pleased, watching as my eyes darted from knife to knife. The only difference between my box of razors under the sink and Azusa’s collection was that Azusa was rich as fuck.

He noticed when my eyes settled on a silver knife. The handle was made to look like a gigantic pike swallowing the blade whole, tiny teeth and menacing eyes included.

“Would you like a…closer look, Elita-san?”

Nodding, I stepped back and let Azusa fetch a small silver key out of his pocket (it was like Mary Poppins’ bag) to open up the cabinet. I’d never seen him so focused on the present. Like he was handling a new-born, he lifted up the knife and held it out towards me on his open palms.

It was heavy in my hands, obviously made for somebody with muscle left in their arms, and it possessed the odd coldness of abandoned houses and forgotten things jammed in furniture. Holding it made me much more aware of the situation, and I instinctively stepped back from Azusa.

He was just…staring at me. His eyes were still present and full of something that made my hairs stand on end.

“Elita-san…”

“Yes?”

There was a lump in my throat.

“Did you come here…because you love me?”

I frowned. Did he say what I thought he did? My Japanese wasn’t the best, and my head was swimming, so it wasn’t out of the question I’d just misheard. Hopefully he was just offering me a cup of tea, or a lift home away from the creepy fucking house.

“I came because you, uh, you said you needed to show me something?”

Apparently I was asking too much of the situation.

He stepped closer to me, and it was then that I realised how I couldn’t escape the room without dashing past him. My weak heart thudded against my ribcage, reminding me that heavy exercise would only result in a palpitation.

“Will you…hurt me?”

I shook my head, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. He didn’t know what personal taste was, but I still didn’t want to make him feel bad.

“Hmmm…” Azusa looked a little disappointed before stepping forward and grabbing my wrist hard in his cold hand. I tried to tug my arm out of his grasp, but only ended up losing my balance and stumbling against the wall of his room.

Instead of taking the knife out of my hand, Azusa took hold of my other wrist and directed the knife-wielding hand towards his shoulder.

“Let me show you…. You can hurt too…”

“Azusa please don’t do this, please, I swear I won’t tell anyone,” I began to babble, my chest
heaving. No matter how hard I tugged I couldn’t shift his grip at all. As soon as I saw the blade near his pale flesh I turned his head, ignoring the hot tears rolling down my cheeks and the bile in my mouth.

After a moment the grip on my wrist loosened to slide up to my hand. He squeezed my fingers until I couldn’t hold onto the knife due to their awkward position (and the coating of sweat on the handle), and it slipped dully onto the floor.

“Elita-san…look at me…”

Although I didn’t want to see what he had waiting, I wasn’t in the position to not do what he wanted. Reluctantly, I turned my head, immediately flinching at the cut in his skin running across his collar bone. I couldn’t see it, but the red stain on his shirt was growing as the seconds ticked by.

He stepped closer and I screamed so loud it hurt my throat. Azusa was still smiling at me. Suddenly I was turned around, and pushed up against the wall. His body pushed mine further into the wall, and one of his knees pressed against my thigh.

With a gentleness that made me struggle harder, he brushed my dead hair away from the crook of my neck. My heart was racing so fast it was impossible to distinguish the individual beats. It was incredible how strong he was- even when I elbowed him in the ribs it only made him hum into my ear in a sickly, satisfied tone.

“I’ll make you feel good…”

_Holy fucking lord above_

His hand slid down my arm, pressing mine against the wall, and after a moments pause he laced our fingers together. The gesture made me want to vomit. For a split second I regretted starving myself until I was weak and breakable.

At least I’d leave something pretty for some unfortunate jogger to find in a muddy ditch.

His breath tickled my ear, and then there was a sharp, hot pain travelling down my in my neck. His hair tickled me, and I tried my best to throw him off. Remembering all of the advice my mother had drilled into me, I took a tiny step back in an attempt to make Azusa loose balance, but the feeling of his front flush against my back made me cringe away immediately.

He continued to sloppily suck on my neck, running his tongue over my skin. Finally, he pulled away.

“Smooth…and bitter…we’ll make it better.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you why are you doing this to me please,” I babbled back, knowing that he couldn’t understand.

Azusa pushed my school shirt down my neck and bit me again. What kind of fetish did he have? Did he have a traumatic experience with Dracula when he was four?

Finally, when his sick self was tired of the apparently shit taste of my blood, I managed to push him back. His teeth tore at my skin, and the pain seared my senses completely. I couldn’t hear what he said to me, or feel the slick warmth of my own blood coating my torso. Staggering, I pushed open his room door. My already weak heart was screaming at me to run and stay still simultaneously.

My vision was framed with a fuzzy ring of black.
I got about two meters away before my legs gave out and I collapsed to the floor. It was so hard to
breath, and slowly, I felt a wave of calm sweep over me.

I was dying.

This is what they’d talk about in the unit, hushed conversations in the dark. Everything was a mess
of calories and weigh-ins and pretty pink pills, and it all ended for just a moment.
It was horrifying.

As I kept on trying to move the numbness only spread across my body, and I’d only succeeded in
making a series of bloody hand-prints across the antique wallpaper. I dimly registered the sound of
murmuring voices before my entire vision blacked out.

_Curtains closed._

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I don't think I like it I'm not the best at
writing canon characters so forgive me for any clumsiness.
My exams start on the 9th of June and end on the 26th, which is convenient since that
is the start of diabolik lovers week. I won't be posting between the 9th and 26th, but I'll
be posting aesthetic stuff on my tumblr @venalmagpie Thank you for all the lovely
comments- it makes me want to write more and write better for you. Stay safe
The last time I’d passed out from blood loss my dance teacher had cut me from the recital (frowning doctor’s orders passed down to my frowning mother passed down to her) and the only logical solution at the time was to cut so deep I stained the grout in the bathroom tiles.

They had it changed while I was in hospital.

No more loose tiles for me to hide my razors under. I felt like an alien when I came back from observation. Eyes followed me to bed to make sure I didn’t hang myself with a belt, and they stared me down as I pushed my spoon against my soup. It was a calculated choice- I couldn’t slip the soup into my pockets or fold it into my napkin.

Not that anyone admitted it, but a sigh of relief spread through the house when I said I didn’t want to live there anymore.

My head was pounding. I tried to turn my head, but something was wound around my neck tightly, and the aching spreading from the crook of my neck to just below my ear made me whimper. It took a moment for my thoughts to organise themselves in my head.

The sheets were way softer than mine at home, and the subtle smell of violets was a far cry from the smell of rabbit.

I didn’t go home last night, I went over to Azusa’s house so I could be assaulted in the privacy of his own home.

Riding on the sudden wave of panic, I ignored the pain and threw the cover off of me. The coldness of the room was only accentuated by the fact that I was only in my thin vest and underwear.

“Elita-san, you’re awake…”

“Holy shit!” I yelled in surprise, stuck between pulling the duvet back over me to retain my modesty (weird what things you think about in stressful situations) and risking exposure and running back home. Not that I knew my way around the woods, or that I had the stamina to make it that long. Even on the best days my heart struggled with the most basic of tasks.

Azusa was stood in the half-open doorway with a tray in his hands. The panic turned into fear and my mouth went dry looking at him. He looked the same as always- a little sleepy, but gentle. I knew better now. I wasn’t going to be tricked again.

The language barrier only made berating him more difficult.

“Get out!”

He frowned slightly and entered anyway. Azusa wasn’t stupid, so he’d probably figured out that I couldn’t physically do anything to him. I got a better look at the contents of the tray- soup (157), a small wholemeal roll (160), and a glass of orange juice (112). The numbers ticked away in my head, blaring like sirens. I didn’t want to be here, and I didn’t want to eat. I backed away as he approached, pressing my body into the corner of the room, wishing it would just swallow me up.

“You need to eat… you passed out earlier,” he continued to talk and set the tray down on the table
next to bedding I’d launched across the floor.

I felt like a rabbit in the headlights. My heart was thudding in my chest so hard it was difficult to breathe. Azusa didn’t seem to notice how absolutely petrified I was and tilted his head as he watched at me. Tucking my arms close to my body, I willed the walls to envelope me. He stepped towards me and I couldn’t stop my voice wavering as I screamed, “Don’t you fucking dare come any closer I swear to God I’ll kill you.” It came out in French, so it probably wasn’t as intimidating as I wanted it to be, not that anything coming from a malnourished, almost naked seventeen year old girl could be.

His shoulders sagged slightly as he sighed, “Let me explain things… I won’t bite again…”

“Why should I believe you?” I asked, so close to tearing up I could feel the water welling along my eyelids.

“Your blood… it won’t taste nice,” Azusa stated simply, stepping back slightly so that he wasn’t between me and the tray. My mind was screaming to just let him kill me so I wouldn’t have to stuff my insides again, fill the Elita-bucket with foul, stagnant water but my body had other ideas. My shaking legs took me to the tray. I picked it up (it may as well have held stacks of bricks it was so heavy) and sat on the bare bed. My vulnerability was made even more obvious by the fact it was probably Azusa that undressed me.

Tiring under the heavy strain, my heartbeat slowed to a pace that made it possible to breathe and I was able to focus on the grounding weight of the tray on my legs. Azusa sat opposite me on a desk chair and watched as I picked up the roll, only letting the tips of my fingers make contact. Who knew what nasty things could seep through my skin like poison.

I broke the smallest chunk possible off of the roll and pinched it between my fingers until the fluffy texture became thick and heavy. Azusa continued to watch the dissection of the bread for a minute until he began.

“Elita-san… the reason I bit you…. will seem…strange.”

No fucking shit.

Keeping quiet, I looked up at Azusa, finally diverting my eyes from the food on my lap. My mind was stuck between the physical danger of a boy with sharp teeth and cold skin, and the lack of faith that I could stop eating once I started.

My body was a usurper.

Monstrous and unnatural.

“I’m a vampire.”

His eyes bore into me, and I desperately tried to understand the word. He was something, but what? Kinky? A psychopath? Only one word seemed to fit in my mind, but there was no way.

“You’re a…catfish?” I asked, almost certain I was wrong. If I wasn’t, Azusa had even more issues than I’d first suspected.

Despite the awful, awful situation, Azusa quietly laughed.

“No, Elita-san, I… I sleep during the day…and drink blood…”
I stared at him incredulously, still completely confused, “You’re a mosquito?”

Was he playing some sick game by making me feel completely stupid before cutting me up and stuffing my head into a bin-bag?

His smile was still there, “Ah, you’re being silly…”

He stepped closer to me. Suddenly the weight on my knees seemed to pin me down. I pushed the tray off of my lap, splattering the soup and juice across the carpet. It was so plush that the fine glass didn’t even break. Before I could even fully comprehend what was going on, his cold hand was around my wrist. Azusa opened his mouth and pressed the tip of my finger against the point of his canine. It was incredibly sharp, and much thinner than my own.

I looked up at his grey eyes. The cogs in my mind turned slowly, the pressure of his tooth against my finger bringing a ridiculous idea to the surface of my mind. Despite his smile before, there was no hint of mirth in his eyes. The blood, his nocturnal habits, the cold fangs that were embedded in my neck, now pressed against my finger.

Was he seriously trying to suggest

he was

a fucking

vampire?

I tried to yank my hand back, pressing my finger harder into the point of his tooth. It broke my thin skin easily, and dark blood quickly beaded on my finger. His tongue (disturbingly warm compared to how cool his skin was) lapped at my bloody digit. The nausea I’d been fighting ever since I’d woken up returned in full force, and my heart began to pound once again. I could see the force of it pulse through my abdomen.

“You’ll taste better… if you eat more.”

He looked at the soup soaking into the carpet and gave my finger a final languid lick before reaching down to pick up the tray and the scattered crockery. There was still a dreamy smile on his face, and when he spoke to me he seemed genuinely curious.

“Maybe… if we eat together… it will be better, ne?”

I’d rather have my skin peeled off than eat with the guy who assaulted me, but it was obvious there was no real concern over what I wanted.

Azusa disappeared out of the door and I began to pull on my clothes (neatly folded on the chest of drawers). The fall from the window would break the bones of a healthy person, and mine were brittle and stick-thin. Unless I wanted to be completely immobile, there was no real option of escape. The house was like a maze, and I didn’t even know what room I was in.

Even if Azusa had an ulterior motive to keep me alive, his brothers didn’t, and I knew in my head that they’d spoken over my emaciated form.

I was sat down at the table considering whether I could hang myself with a pair of tights when Azusa came back into the room. He didn’t notice when I flinched as he put the tray down and sat opposite me. Smiling, he took the two bowls off of the tray and put it on the floor.
It smelled spicy, and the nausea concocted from the combination of fear and exhaustion made me want to be sick at the sight of so much food.

“It’s spicy vegetable soup… Ruki makes it a lot…” Azusa informed me, already lifting his full spoon up to his lips. I frowned a little- the soup was still steaming. It was sure to burn his tongue.

He fucking deserved it.

“Can vampires eat normal food?” I asked as he eagerly ate his own portion. For some reason the silence bothered me. What was the point in pretending that I wasn’t completely terrified, and that a creature of the night wasn’t sat opposite me eating soup his brother made?

Azusa looked up like he’d forgotten I was there entirely. Despite my tone he seemed completely calm, “Yes, Elita-san… but it’s not the same…. We need blood to live, food… food is fun.”

In what alternate universe was food considered fun.

I lifted the spoon up through the soup and tilted the utensil until nearly all of the liquid had slipped off of it. My head was swimming (probably not helped from the INCREDIBLE BLOOD LOSS) and if I passed out I’d have to stay longer.

I raised the spoon to my lips and ignored the shudder of pleasure that traveled through me as the soup came in contact with my tongue. It wasn’t so much the flavour, but the warmth that made me tremble. Food preparation added calories, and I didn’t want to risk having so much around to tempt me, so I lived on a diet of pills and cold salads.

Ignoring the heat spreading across my tongue from the spice, I looked over at Azusa. He was eating more slowly now, savouring it.

Clearing my throat, I did my best not to let my voice tremble and ruin the illusion of calm.

“Will you let me go home? I need to feed the rabbits.”

Slowly, Azusa looked up from his soup, looking a little confused, “Of course, Elita-san… we can keep an eye on you… wherever you are.”

I was about to reply (whether it was to protest in being watched, or to fall at his knees and thank him for letting me go I wasn’t sure) when he continued.

“My brothers think… it’s a bad choice, since…since you do what I do… but I like it.”

Not really true, since you’re eating fine, and you don’t seem the type to go and get rid of it after.

I kept my thoughts to myself in an attempt to earn my freedom back. As soon as I was away from this house of horrors I’d skip my happy self down to the police station and report everything. He was eating his soup fine, and I’d seen his reflection in mirrors before. It was a moment of desperation. It was easier to believe that he was a vampire than a fucking weirdo who thought he was a vampire.

Once Azusa had finished his soup (I managed three more mouthfuls when I was sure that he was watching) he sat back and looked at me. His gaze was completely blank, and it only made me pull my over-sized blazer tighter around my shoulders.

“I’ll send you a food list… to keep your blood nice,” Azusa explained, his hand idly tracing the edge of his bandage. There was a cute little bat pin holding it in place- the fact he had one which I
presumed was bought just for the purpose said a lot about him. And his family. Even if they didn’t like it, they didn’t make him hide it or pretend it didn’t happen.

Completely ridiculously, a bubble of jealousy floated slowly to the surface of my mind. I pinched my thigh hard.
I tried my best not to sound completely hostile, “Anything else?”

It didn’t matter. If he told me I had to pretend to be a wild boar for the rest of my life I would’ve done it in a lethargic heartbeat.

He nodded, that tiny smile appearing on his face again, “You can come over more… you like the knives, ne…?”

I mustered all of the energy left in my tired bones to produce a tired smile. It showed too much of my weak teeth and was generally hideous, but Azusa seemed to perk up a little.

“Thank you, Azusa-kun. That sounds nice”

A thin streak of light shone through the gap in the curtains. The panic I’d ignored for a while now resurfaced. How long had I been there?

I stood up, gripping onto the table so hard my knuckles looked like the vertebrae of some small creature. Flecks of black and white danced around the edges of my vision and my heart protested at the movement, but I ignored it. I had to get out.

“Azusa-kun, can I go home? I need to get ready for school.”

He looked up at me and then nodded, “I’ll… come with you… on the car ride…”

I let out a quiet sigh- there was no way I could tell anyone if he was literally in my flat- and scanned the room for my belongings. Luckily they were at the end of the bed on the floor, and not obviously rummaged through. Those shreds of privacy seemed incredibly important. Their eyes had already taken in the dimpling fat and soft rolls of hate around my stomach dotted with pink/red/white lines

That's what he meant. He had whale sharks swimming over his skin, and I had thousands of salmon. That's how we were 'the same'.

We walked out of the room and down a twisting corridor. I saw the vacuum cleaners and feather dusters that indicated a cleaner, but no actual person. It wasn’t surprising- the house was huge and they obviously didn’t have money troubles- but the lack of life made me shudder. Did this happen so often that they stopped caring about whatever lost soul was lead into one of the rooms, filled with velvet and cold hands?

Just before we reached the gigantic front doors Ruki appeared without a sound, a book in his hand. He looked mildly disappointed.

Oh yes, Azusa said Ruki thought I was a ‘bad choice’.

Honestly I agreed. The school was filled with pretty girls with functioning insides. Maybe if Ruki had a good talk with Azusa I’d be left alone.

Or they’d kill me.

Either way, it would be an improvement.
My parents obviously trained me well, because despite everything, I bowed slightly towards the oldest brother. “Thank you for having me, Ruki-san.”

He looked at me coldly and turned to Azusa, “Are you taking her home now?”

“Yes…”

Ruki turned to me, and I stepped a little closer to Azusa. Even if Azusa was unpredictable and strange, the cold rolling off of Ruki made me shiver instinctively. Azusa’s eyes made me feel like a person, but Ruki saw me as something much less deserving of empathy.

“Has Azusa told you?” He took a deep breath and raised his hand to his forehead, like he’d given this speech a thousand times before, “Nobody will believe you if you tell, and if we find out you have, we’ll have to kill you.”

Oh god, he was serious about the whole vampire thing.

I nodded, steadying my shaking hands, “I understand.”

Finally, he smiled (it didn’t reach his eyes), “I’m glad. Thank you for coming, Elita-san.”

“I’ll be back…soon…Ruki,” Azusa interjected.

His cold hand wrapped around my wrist and I was lead out through the gigantic doors. The sun had risen long ago, but it wasn’t high in the sky yet. Azusa was so pale, and he looked almost translucent in the sunlight. Birdsong echoed across the garden, and the sound of digging encroached on the quiet from the other sound of the mansion.

Maybe some other girl’s being buried

The car was waiting for us in their gigantic, circular driveway, and Azusa stepped back to allow me to get in. The driver of the car stared straight ahead, ignoring the attempted eye-contact through the driver’s side mirror. Azusa sat right next to me, letting his head lean back against the headrest.

“Azusa-kun?”

“Hm…?” He looked at me sleepily, raising his head.

I swallowed, not wanting to say anything offensive and have my head torn off, “I’m sorry to ask again, but…you’re really vampires?” I’d remembered the word from before, and despite everything I felt a little proud of myself.

Nodding, Azusa replied, “Yes…it takes a….it takes a while to get…used to the idea…”

“Were you human once?”

His brow furrowed slightly, and his hand traced over his bandaged arm, “…A long time ago…”

Soon Azusa was deep in thought and I just sat in silence, watching as the trees thinned out and were replaced by buildings and streetlights. My throat felt tight, and it was hard not to cry when I saw the car pull up outside my block of flats. I was alive.

I may have jumped up a little too eagerly, because that cold hand was shackled around my wrist again.
“I’ll see you… in the library…” He said, still looking not *entirely* there.

“Of course. Goodbye, Azusa-kun,” I said, using what felt like the last of my strength to tug my arm free and get out of the car.

Although the windows were tinted black, I could feel his eyes on me the entire time he drove away.

The rabbits ran to me as soon as I came in, up on their hind legs with their little noses twitching. Too tired to do much of anything, I grabbed an apple and roughly chopped it as an apology for not coming home earlier, and gave Gloom and Grimm a little stroke.

I kept one of the apple pieces and took my medication with it. Uniform still on, I crawled into bed, and immediately began to drift off. There was time to cry in the morning. Right then, I wanted to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone.

My first exam is on Friday and I am shitting myself because I am useless. Things haven't been going well, so I thought I’ get this chapter out early for you all. Stay safe everyone, and thank you for all the kudos and lovely comments.
My head woke up a few seconds before my body, full of panic as my body refused to fight against
the perceived threat hulking in the corner of the room. After a few seconds (eyes screwed tightly
shut, trying my best to wriggle my toes) movement returned to me, and the shadow in the corner
was just a shadow once more. Apparently my wriggling had disturbed the rabbits, who’d hopped
up onto my bed while I was asleep, and they bounded back onto the floor. No doubt they were
dissatisfied with their dinner the night before.
Everything ached. The dressing on my neck was partially peeling off from all of the tossing and
turning, and to top it off the sun was already sinking below the horizon. The two bite marks, one
high enough to be hidden by my hair, and the other in a much more prominent position, seemed
itchy.

Praying to god that I hadn’t caught some blood-borne infection from Azusa’s nasty mouth, I got up
as slowly as possible. Flecks of black and white danced in the edges of my vision, and my heart
was beating so hard it made my soft stomach jolt. It was so tempting to stay in bed longer, but just
the idea of one of the Mukami brothers coming to the house made a wave of nausea sweep over to
me. It was my territory. My space. They couldn’t come in.
Finally when my heart had calmed down I headed to the shower in slow, shaky steps. The rabbits
hopped around my feet, standing on their hind legs when I didn’t respond.

“Give me a second,” I responded groggily to their protests, closing the bathroom door behind me.

If I thought I looked fucking dead before I was in for a delightful surprise.

The bags under my eyes were even bigger than before, and now a corpse-grey rather than purple.
Obviously my thrashing around had caused whatever scabbing over the wounds to flake off, and
dried blood was smudged around the dressing.
It was too tiring to take a shower. I wet a towel like the scab I was and scrubbed gingerly at the
blood on my neck, watching as the white fabric turned pink.

The cleaner I get the more time I’d have to spend at the washing machines downstairs trying to not
look like a mass murderer.

After putting on my uniform (my collar as high as possible) I gingerly rested my fingers against the
exposed bite mark on my neck. Although I could push my hair in front of it (which was falling out
even faster than before- thanks Azusa) it wasn’t as sure-fire as I wanted. I dug into the small
jewellery box on top of my chest of drawers and pulled out a thick, black choker. Sure it made me
look like an angsty teen (showing my true colours) but it covered up the bite marks, and the little
crescent moon on the front made me look like a member of an occult club.

I deliberately didn’t pack any lunch in a small act of rebellion towards the apparent vampires who
wanted my shitty blood, and gave the extra to the rabbits bounding around the room. So
preoccupied with their food, they didn’t notice as I slipped out the door.

Tugging my clothes closer to my body, I walked as quickly through the roaring wind as my tired
muscles would allow. By the time I reached the school building my lips were blue and any anxiety
I had about heading in was pushed out by the need to get warm. I knew it was good really, I’d burn
more of the nastiness on my thighs, but it still didn’t feel good. Not wanting to be spotted by a
particular set of brothers, I near enough ran to my classroom.

Yui was there ahead of me, looking just as tired. I forgot my own aches and pains (and apparently my manners too) and gently nudged her on the shoulder, “Good morning, Yui-san.”

She smiled (it was like an angel) but I could only notice how much…thinner her skin seemed. I could see the veins fanning out from around her eyes more clearly than the day before. Had her roommates given her that much trouble?

“Good morning Elita, how are you?”

I sat down slowly and began to unwind the scarf around my neck reluctantly. It was difficult to check if the choker was still in place without exposing the two bruising bite-marks on my neck, and my hurry to get inside may have shifted it.

“Tired.”

“That seems to be the general feeling,” Yui hummed, reaching out for her notebook and flipping through it. It prompted me to bring out my own notepad.

My hands froze.

Underneath the statistics in French, somebody had translated them into Japanese. The writing was far too neat to be mine. A burning sensation crept up my throat as I looked down at the foreign characters. I couldn’t even read them for fucks sake. Digging my nails into my palm, I did my best not to scream as Yui looked over at my work.

She seemed genuinely impressed, “Wow, you’ve done so well, Elita-san! It’s perfect.”

It took a moment to get my mouth to work.

“I didn’t do it?”

Yui tilted her read, still smiling, “Did somebody help you translate it for you?”

Swallowing hard, I shook my head again, “Somebody went through it while I was asleep.”

The smile disappeared from her face, only making me feel more uneasy.

“Did you stay over at someone’s house?”

“Not on purpose.”

She bit down on her lower lip, seemingly focused on something I couldn’t understand completely. I tried my best to reassure her, although my efforts were more for myself than for her.

“It’s okay, it’s not as bad as it seems-“

Finally her ruby eyes focused on me again, and the smile returned, “We can talk about it some time. What about tomorrow lunch- I have a science revision session today.”

I just managed to nod before the teacher came in and the chatter of the class stopped completely. At least the lecturer was impressed with ‘my’ work. Having come from another country to live on my own, and to such a prestigious school, even with all of the weird shit going on I felt I had to prove myself academically. All throughout my school life I’d never gotten less than an A (schoolwork was a wonderful distraction from my thinning hair and dry skin) and a condition of my
staying there from my family was good grades. Even if I was a fat embarrassment of a daughter who was only spoken about in past tense, a living ghost, I was not allowed to be stupid. The rest of the class passed quickly, both Yui and I making deliberate efforts to steer the conversation from my homework and her tired eyes. Finally the period ended and we were both hurriedly stuffing our work into our backpacks.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Elita-san, under the pear tree?” Yui suggested, smiling again. I wanted her to smile more- she didn’t deserve to feel sad.

I nodded, managing to genuinely smile for the first time that night, “Of course, I’ll bring something.” Maybe I could make some lemon biscuits.

*I could imagine the bags of flour and sugar and licking the greasy smear of butter from my fingers*

I would suck on lemon segments until I was sick. The butter would make me worse, and so would the flour, and everything else for that matter. I was best when I was empty.

Next period passed without incident, deciding on briefs for that term’s art project and mind mapping our ideas. It was a pleasant break from all of the other subjects- I was left completely alone. Everyone had their earphones in (the art lecturers was decidedly more relaxed than those in the other departments) and was focused more on their own work than the goblin in the corner. I even forgot about my aching neck and pounding head until it was time to go. Not wanting to get caught up in art club (the idea of extra-curricular exhausted me alone) I packed up quickly and began to walk.

With a sickening certainty, I knew that if I strayed too close to the canteen my body would betray me and I’d be stuffing myself before I could even blink. My head felt light as air and my joints ached- I needed to sit down. With the canteen out of the question, I turned to the library.

*Rats probably nest in the walls, swim in the soup there. It’s nasty nasty gross gross and everyone is looking at your thighs jiggle every time you take a step you pus-filled walrus*

I was right. I should head to the library and work more on my sketchbook since I didn’t have to worry about translating the facts for history anymore. Although it was by far the least threatening thing to have happened, it was… ominous.

*They didn’t let me have any secrets in hospital. We had two hours alone in our room- with checks every fifteen minutes- and when they found the medication that made me worse stuffed under my mattress they made me watch as they tore my room apart.*

*Transparent shampoo bottles.*

*Lace-less shoes.*

*The counsellor flipping through my journal telling me that what I wrote was wrong and toxic and that they trusted me not to spend my time in the shower doing squats.*

At least it was quiet in the library.

I found it incredible how most of the students didn’t seem tired despite it being one in the morning. People could adapt, but not to the level where you could get teenagers to study in the middle of the night.

*Unless everyone there was a vampire.*

Most of the soft chairs hidden within the labyrinth of bookshelves were taken up by groups of
friends struggling to eat quietly enough to avoid the librarian, but there was an older, navy armchair in the ‘cultural studies’ section just begging me to plant my fat ass on it.

I was so grateful to be hidden. Being introverted made school difficult sometimes— it was a wonder how I managed twelve years of dance classes. Was it because I just enjoyed dance enough to ignore the anxious ache in my stomach whenever the teacher mentioned my name?

The low coffee table made it a little awkward to spread out all of the images for my mood board, but if I wanted to bake something for Yui so I could play the ‘regular eating’ role to the best of my ability then I needed to get some done before school was over. The prompt was ‘macabre’ (probably a collaboration with Western literature, where we were studying gothic novels) so a medley of bones and gore and dark forests were placed on the table.

It was a good prompt.

Maybe sneak in some hospital pictures, show them a real monster.

“Elita-san…”

I jumped, catching the sketchbook with my flailing hands and sending half of the pictures fluttering onto the floor. I just couldn’t catch a damn break, but it was surprising how long it took him to track me down.

I hoped my blood smelled especially shitty so he would leave.

“Christ… you’re quiet,” my eyes darted between him and the pictures on the floor. He didn’t seem like the perverted type (at least not bold enough to lift my skirt while I was on my hands and knees) so I got down and began to gather the images. My heart pounded so hard that I worried it would burst out of my rib cage, sick of the abuse.

He got down on his knees too, making sure not to crumple or bend the corners of the pictures he picked up, “Sorry… I wanted to make sure… you were okay.”

My head snapped up at the absurdity of his question. Mr ‘If you don’t stab me I’ll bite you and then force feed you so much your stomach explodes’ was concerned for me? I rolled my eyes, but it was cowardly— he wasn’t looking. I was still scared of him after all, far too scared to go shit-talking him.

“My neck hurts. How long does it take to heal?”

If I kept things simple, he wouldn’t be able to get angry. It didn’t seem possible, watching him pick up the pictures and carefully place them back on the table, but that only made the prospect of it more horrifying.

Azusa thought for a moment, “Longer… than it should… You’re weak…”

Thanks.

“And how long is that?” I asked, returning to my seat. I wanted to stay as still as possible and prevent the palpitation I could feel on the horizon. They were pretty horrific, especially when I had to move around and do stuff as my heart went into a frenzy.

“A week…maybe… the bruises are… pretty on you.”

I fought back the urge to vomit. The comment was so genuine, and it sent chills down my spine.
The connotations *(bruise hurt choke)* were scary.

With shaking hands, I gathered the pictures into one pile and put them in my sketchbook, closing it and sealing them inside. I found it hard enough to do my work with a teaching assistant watching me, let alone the creepy guy who breathed too heavily and had a fondness for assaulting me.

“Your heart… it won’t… beat so fast… if you eat.”

Well, he had a point.

Knowing that there was no hiding from Azusa I shrugged weakly, “I’d rather die than be fat. I hope I die.”

The words had been stewing inside me for years. I had to keep them locked up, away from the grabby, rubber-gloved hands of doctors and nurses who wanted to remove all of the rotten bits of me *even if I needed them.*

It felt odd to just release them. They were there one moment, and gone the next, and Azusa didn’t have an ounce of medical standing.

His neutral face changed into a frown, “Elita-san…”

What else did I expect? Understanding perhaps? It was obvious he self-harmed, but it was a stretch to think he hated his flesh too.

He was so thin though. For once, I wasn’t a fucking idiot for thinking somebody else was as sick as me in this weird night school for eccentric rich kids.

“I’ll help you…live.”

“Aren’t you a vampire?”

His frown was replaced by a tiny smile, “Ah… humans have… weird beliefs…. I’m alive, Elita-san…”

Well he had me there. I suppose it made sense that what I knew was wrong- Azusa was out in the sun the day before without a single wisp of smoke rising from his skin. The idea of him hissing and recoiling during religious studies was enough to make me ‘laugh’ (more like breath a bit louder out of my nose).

While I was away in fairyland (one where I was as thin as I wanted and vampires followed all of the rules set out in storybooks) Azusa had reached into his bag and brought a tinfoil package. The very sight of it made my skin crawl, and he nudged the parcel across the table to make it even more obvious what was expected of me.

I opened it as slowly as possible, stalling for time so that I could claim I had a class to head to and escape contaminating myself with whatever was in the- oh god it was a jam sandwich.

My traitorous mouth immediately began to water. I wasn’t the biggest sweet fan, but I hadn’t even seen a jam sandwich since I was a young child and my stomach ached for it. Addled by the food, my brain decided to go against *everything I had worked for* and raised the sandwich to my mouth like I couldn’t refuse and leave the library.

Having my wrist broken by a sad vampire was better than giving up after so many years.

When I paused, my hands gripping the bread so tightly it made indents, Azusa’s eyes flickered up
from the assortment of pictures and focused on me. It wouldn’t even be hard to break my wrist- my bones were so brittle and frail that I’d fractured my ulna in the clinic by banging awkwardly against a wardrobe.

I continued to raise the sandwich, and took the smallest bite possible. At first I registered how cool the bread was, how my teeth sunk into the layers like they weren’t there at all. Clearly homemade (which was surprising- Azusa didn’t seem like the cooking type) the jam was more tart than sweet and made me salivate. I couldn’t let myself realise how good it was.

The bread was crusted with mould, and the jam had been found up in the attic ten years ago, the seal broken long before anyone discovered it. They weren’t berries they were **lumps of gore swimming in viscous blood barely contained by the-**

“Do you like it…Elita-san?”

Although the gruesome imagery was useful for limiting how much I stuffed into my fat fucking mouth, it made swallowing the mush more difficult. The fleshy lumps (and all of the parasites inevitably living in them) were already worming into the walls of my stomach, surely, a punishment for my lack of discipline.

My stomach cramped. I grit my teeth.

Azusa noticed immediately, standing next to my chair. Despite his slow movements, I didn’t try to move away, focused instead on the pollutants inside of me, predicting how my body would punish me when it was clearly better off being clean and healthy.

“You’re shaking… maybe you’re ill…” he frowned, holding his ice cold palm against my forehead. I bit back a snarky comment that everyone would feel feverish compared to his cold-ass hand, and instead leaned back in the chair. His hand followed my movements. Slowly, it moved upwards, lazily dragging through my dead hair and pulling it away from my neck.

The feeling of his eyes on the bruises from the night before made me tense up, and Azusa finally withdrew his hand, which was more surprising than the jam sandwich.

So, he cared about small things that made me uncomfortable, but not luring me to his house as a blood bag. Funny.

“I’m not ill. I’m getting better. I’m fine.” I repeated what I always said when I wanted to stop talking.

Finally he backed away, and there was a smile on his face, “That’s good… can I…come over, Elita-san?”

“Come where?”

I was hastily shoving my belongings back into my bag (along with the rest of the sandwich- that could go in the dog shit bin) ready to head to my next class and pretend it never happened.

“Your house… I like your rabbits…”

I’d say anything to get away.

“Sure, sometime. Goodbye, Azusa-kun.”
Before he could use his spooky super speed, I headed out of that nook of the library, brushing my hair back into place. Hopefully I looked presentable.

I could tell I was going to perfect the 'pretend I'm not running away but I am' walk before the year was up.

Chapter End Notes

Yaaay exams are over (pretty sure I won't get AAA but that's a problem for future me) so, as promised, a new chapter. Love you all. Sorry it's sub-par
Chapter Notes

I want to dedicate this chapter to the incredible BiffManly, who has been so supportive of my work from the get go <3 They're a super duper cutie patootie and did some wonderful art of Azusa with Gloom and Grimm on their blog biffmanly.tumblr.com. Go and send them some love because they deserve all the love in the world.

The remaining lectures passed quickly, and I lied about going to see the doctor so I could leave ten minutes early and avoid seeing Azusa outside the school. My heart thudded- I’d never skived before- but if it meant I could keep the thin blood in me then it was worth it.

I’d made the lemon biscuits so many times with my mother that I knew the recipe off by heart. I gave myself a moment outside of the twenty-four hour supermarket, tote bag in hand. I was going to buy a small bag of flour, a small bag of sugar, the most minuscule bar of butter available, and a lemon. That was all. There would be no weakness, not when the sun was almost rising and I’d done so well to toss the jam sandwich straight into the bin outside my house.

The glare from the fluorescent lights along with the quiet pop music playing over the speakers sent a wave of nostalgia washing over me. It was nearly empty save for the bartenders and cleaners coming off of night duty and grabbing mediocre cups of coffee from the vending machine. I hoped that I didn’t look too out of place- the dark circles under our eyes matched, after all.

I held my breath as soon as I entered the baking aisle. There was a rule I had to follow- everything I needed had to be in my basket before I had to take another breath, and whatever I didn’t get I’d have to do without.

After collecting the ingredients (stars were swimming in my eyes and I had to awkwardly jog out of the aisle before I could allow myself to breathe again) I picked up a large pot of gum and paid for everything at the counter. It was oddly calming to have the cashier swipe my items through and accept my money without playing the slightest bit of attention to me.

I was so proud of myself for buying the bare minimum that I returned home in a positively chirpy mode. Apart from the pain in my joints and the butterflies that clouded my vision whenever I did anything too fast, starving made me feel incredible. I felt light; my feet barely touched the ground as I dumped the bag on the counter and lifted up a rabbit in each hand. I’d been neglecting Gloom and Grimm recently, and I felt guilty.

My heart thudded faster in my chest, threatening to go into an all-out palpitation when I bent down to pick the two of them up. I sat down clumsily against the counter, running my hands through their fur. After a while of squirming they settled awkwardly on my lap and relaxed their ears. It made me happy to see that they were happy. Everyone at the hospital used to joke that I’d snap and skin them alive one day- which wasn’t fair, Caroline and I were completely different people.

As much fun as it would be to sit and spoil the rabbits all day, I wanted to get the biscuits baked early so I could head to bed. Ever since Azusa had started talking to me it had been difficult to get to sleep. The slither of moonlight hitting the white wall always looked like his thin figure whenever I was lying in bed, and clear visions of him flitted through my dreams. In my old dance
studio, in the art room, sharpening the knives in the kitchen back home.

Wanting to distract myself as much as possible from the bags of poison (enough to make my flesh mushroom out of my clothing and dirty spores drift out of my eyes) I lifted my laptop onto the bed and unpacked the ingredients as it switched on. The whir of the fan was familiar, and the twinge of homesickness that I usually refused to acknowledge grew stronger.

I put on some music and faced down the flour and sugar and butter. Yes, they looked innocent, but I knew that they would crawl into my arteries and clog together if I gave them the chance. I was stronger than that.

I’d just finished weighing everything out with the shitty scales I found in the cupboard (probably abandoned on purpose, the needle danced all over the measure whenever I moved it) when the music coming from my laptop stopped, replaced by the ringtone for a video call.

Ignoring how gross it felt for somebody to see me with food (no wonder I was fat) I answered the call. Jean, my brother, appeared on screen, hair still wet from the shower. He looked the same as ever, but the bookshelves which had been sparsely populated when he first moved in were now bursting with academic journals and historical documents.

“Heeey ghoulie girl,” he greeted loudly, grinning his usual asshole grin.

“Heeey Jobless Jean,” I replied, turning back to the bowl full of ingredients and placing it on the rickety table so that I was facing him. I began to knead them together, feeling nauseous as soon as the butter grease came into contact with my skin. I couldn’t show it on my face or wear gloves though, not with Jean watching me.

Jean pouted, “Hey, I’m working on my masters, so I do have a job missy.” He stuck his tongue out at me, and I returned the juvenile gesture. The pressure of forcing the flour and sugar and butter together made my knuckles ache.

“Besides,” he continued, his tongue busy talking shit once more, “What have you got in that bowl there?”

“Lemon biscuits. I’m meeting a friend soon for lunch, and I knew the recipe.”

“Ooh, what’s their name? What do they look like? Are they cute?”

I wrinkled my nose at the comment, reaching to grab the lemon and the small, sharp knife, “That’s fucking gross, Jean. Her name’s Yui, she has pretty pinky-red eyes, and she’s not interested in creepy historians.”

Jean feigned disappointment, looking down into his mug like a sad hipster in a café based above a solicitor’s office, “Still cold as ice, little ghoul.”

I cut the lemon up and squeezed the halves with both hands, watching for any seeds that might fall into the mix and ruin it. Yui was my only friend- I didn’t want her choking to death. The smell of lemon was so strong it made my head swim. I remembered lemon tarts, the feeling of my teeth sinking through smooth, tangy filling like it wasn’t there at all.

My knuckles turned white I squeezed the lemon so hard. The biscuits were not for me. I would not be touching the biscuits.

Jean was quiet for so long I wondered if he’d hung up. Instead, he was looking through his phone, and suddenly he went pale.

“…Jean?”
He looked back up, and his face regained some colour, “Hey, Elita, what’s your school email?”

I was already suspicious.

“What?”

“Oh,” Jean took a moment, which only made it more clear something was going on, “One of your old school friends wanted to talk to you, but I reckoned that you wouldn’t want them knowing your Skype.”

“You’re a bad liar,” I replied simply. The crumbs were starting to clump together into a dough, but I kept on kneading. Usually I liked to minimize contact with food (no matter what the doctor said the calories could come through my skin I wasn’t stupid I knew) but I didn’t want to turn my back to the screen.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, “I’m not bad, you’re just an expert. Anyway, I’m not lying, it was Madeline Perrin, your old duet partner.”

Knowing that I wouldn’t get the truth out of him, I rolled my eyes and gave the email address. It wasn’t like my mother wouldn’t just ask the school for it and cause a massive scene if I refused. Once he was done noting it down, I let myself pretend that he was really giving my email to my old duet partner.

“Remember when you’d walk me home from the studio?” I asked, a smile on my face. It felt like another lifetime.

Maybe I was hit by a bus on the way home one day, and ever since it was all some elaborate torture to repay for my sins.

He smiled, and it looked like whatever text had bothered him was completely forgotten, “You used to complain that your legs were tired until I’d piggyback you home.”

“And there was that nice corner shop, and the owner would give you a lolly whenever we passed by,” I added. I could feel the setting sun on my skin, hear the old music drifting from inside the brightly-tiled shop. It was owned by an old man, and his dog would lie outside and sleep in the sun. That was the disadvantage of forgetting. Even if there were no familiar faces or old acquaintances in Tokyo, there wasn’t anything comforting either. It was clear that I didn’t fit in (being fatter than everyone else didn’t help matters) and how difficult it was to understand what people were saying made me feel even more isolated. I was a bacteria floating through the crowded tissues of the city, an invader.

Did that make Azusa some white blood cell, weakening me until I couldn’t go out anymore?

*Enough with the analogy dumbass, Jean is looking at you*

“So you’ve made friends with Yui, anyone else?”

I hesitated. Azusa was no friend of mine, but I wanted to give him good material to report back to Mum and Dad.

“Oh yeah, there’s this boy Azusa and his older brothers that I get along with.”

Suddenly Jean’s eyes glittered mischievously, “Ooooooh~ A boy did you say?”

“Yeah, a *friend*- do you know what they are?”
He ignored my comment and began to sing tunelessly, “We’re going to the chapel and we’re-“

“Please stop.”

“GONNA GET MAAAAARRRIED-~”

I picked up the sharp knife and pointed it threateningly at the screen, “I swear to the Lord above Jean…”

He laughed and sipped at his coffee again before talking, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I should reserve my approval before I meet the chump.”

“Holy fuck Jean.”

His laughter continued, and my hands slowly stopped working the dough. What was the end game? I knew without a doubt that Azusa would kill me- Ruki had pretty much implied that I’d be murdered if I tried to leave just to keep their secret safe. It was only so long until Azusa realised that I didn’t eat for anybody because I wasn’t dumb enough to trust blatant lies over what my own eyes saw, and unlike a doctor, he couldn’t just force some meds into me that made the world soft and dreamy with cushioned edges.

It would be an end of sharp pain, not soft fuzz.

The silence stretched for a while longer, and my eyes returned to the face on the screen. Jean was eyeing me, although it was with quiet fondness, “As dreamy as ever.”

“Not dreamy, just trying to think of how to improvise a cookie cutter,” I corrected. He chuckled before glancing at his watch.

“I’m sorry ghoulie girl, teasing session has got to end early,” he grinned at me. Obviously he had a date coming up- I knew that sly smile.

I raised my hand in farewell, “Make sure not to show your true self- you want a second date right?”

He playfully flipped me off, but Jean knew he had the whole package. As much as I took the piss, he could play the whole ‘sensitive academic’ role really well, and the money he got from tutoring kids meant he could afford nice enough clothes and dates.

“Be safe,” Jean said, suddenly turning serious. We both knew I was lucky to go an entire Skype session without an interrogation regarding my meds and diet and the CBT sheets I blatantly filled out the night before the appointment.

“You too Jean,” I replied, and I saw him wave once more before the screen went black once more.

By the time the playlist was finished the biscuits were in the oven and I was on the floor, hand feeding the rabbits. Their soft tongues lapped at my fingers, cleaning away what could seep into me. Their dark eyes blinked at me as I chatted to myself, watching the sky outside become lighter and lighter as the sun continued its assent into the sky.

“Remember when we used to sit in the dressing room with that measuring tape and see how many times we could wind it around our thighs?”

Gloom blinked. I sighed.

“Well, not you, but everyone else. I realised that I didn’t have the pretty face the others had-
Madeline looked like a china doll- but I could be thin. I was the thinnest girl there, and then I got all of the solos.”

My voice had turned into a harsh whisper. Grimm flopped down on the floor, their fluffy feet stretched out behind them.

“I was the Swan Princess and the Sea Nymph and I got a featured role in the senior company.”

My cheeks were wet.

“How was I supposed to stop when nobody wanted me to.”

My teachers wanted me thin, and my mother wanted me to stop being mediocre.

Starving was the best thing to ever happen to me.

The timer went off for the biscuits and I took them out of the oven, rubbing my wet cheeks in my elbow. In ten minutes I would forget I was even talking at all.

…I woke up before the alarm, rising groggily from my dreamless sleep. After the nights of vivid nightmares it felt disconcerting to not have something awful to consider first thing in the morning.

The bites were still bruised, but the deep purple had faded to a sickly yellow, and it was now possible to conceal them with makeup instead of risking getting into shit with the lecturers over a non-uniform choker.

I’d just finished pulling all of my layers on when there was a knock on the door. It was so quiet I thought I’d imagined it at first, but the repeated gentle sound made me certain. A conveniently timed wave of cramps crept through my stomach causing me to fold over like a piece of paper. The knocking continued, and then the door handle jiggled.

It was sick how he pretended he couldn’t just break the door in, or better yet, jump onto the balcony and come in through the sliding door.

“Elita-san… are you up..?”

“One second,” I replied, feeling like I’d been dunked in ice water. The flat was my own little bubble, the last line of defense I had. Just letting Mr.Beret in felt wrong.

But it was just the illusion of choice. Regardless of what I said, he’d be inside anyway. It was better to save the money needed to replace the door or the damage to my heart if he flew in through the window.

I straightened up and opened the door. Typically, Azusa stood in uniform, no schoolbag, with bandages looping around his knees. However, it was strange to see a takeaway coffee cup in his hand.

His eyes seemed a little brighter than usual, like he was happy I’d opened the door for him like a dumbass.

“Good morning…Elita-san.”

He held out the coffee cup and I scooped up my bag and sketchbook. The weight of it would surely wear grooves into my shoulders like the waves against weathered rock.

We headed out (I’d mentally said my last goodbyes to Gloom and Grimm in case Azusa
decapitated me on the way to school) and Azusa stopped in the hall.

I looked over at him, already edgy with anxiety.

“Are you okay?”

Pass me... your sketchbook... Elita-san.”

Uncertainly I passed it to him, and took the cup in exchange. It felt heavy in my hands and my mouth smelt something disgusting (it was heavenly, like lemon verbena and chamomile) wafting up from the cup.

Azusa’s smile grew more.

“Kou said... it was nice... to do things for girls...” He explained, like it justified showing up unannounced to my house.

“Kou... Your brother with really long eyelashes?”

He looked over at me with the expression of a dejected puppy, “You...like him more...Elita-san?”

More than what?

Oh.

“I, uh, I’m bad with names, so I notice things so I know people?” My Japanese seemed to deteriorate whenever I was around the vampire- my thudding heart made it too hard to concentrate on proper nouns and connectives.

His smile returned, and the knot of anxiety in my stomach loosened slightly. At least I hadn’t pissed him off. Just being around the Mukami brothers gave me the impression that vampires as a whole weren’t into sharing, especially when it came to ‘blood bags’ like me.

I was pretty much the easiest meal anyone could think of. Too weak to fight back, too tired to tell anyone.

We walked mostly in silence, listening to the wind in the trees and the chatter from the bars and restaurants that were still open. Being the same height made it easy to keep up, but my legs protested when Azusa decided to take the ‘scenic route’ through the town center. The fear of punishment if I strayed from his side kept me moving with him until we were stood before the school doors.

“Thank you for the tea, Azusa-kun,” I said politely. I shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, waiting for him to hand my sketchbook back so I could scream into the night somewhere private.

For once he seemed genuinely pleased, “Thank you... for walking here...with me.”

Thanks for not giving me any choice in the matter.

His hand closed around my empty cup, and the sketchbook was back in my arms. I held it against my chest like a protective shield.

Hopefully that was his dose of my presence for the day, and he could entertain himself with sniffing my panties or something else appropriately creepy for the rest of the day.

“Elita-san...”
“I’ll…see you at lunch…on the roof…” Azusa stared right at me, his pale grey eyes suddenly completely focused. I wasn’t to misunderstand. It wasn’t an offer. It was a command.

I felt so unstable- the seemingly nice gesture of the tea contrasted so greatly with the actual gravity of the situation it felt like my memory was in pieces, and I was jamming them together incorrectly. They were similar shapes, but the details were all wrong.

A boy walks you to school.

Pins you to a wall and sucks your blood.

Bile was creeping up my throat.

“Yes, Azusa-kun. I’ll see you then.”

I awkwardly waved at him, and was swallowed by the stream of people heading into the school. His eyes followed me all the way to class.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone, I hope you liked this chapter. It was the first time I cranked one out over the course of an evening, so I hope that it's up to standard. Much love, stay safe
As much as I tried to concentrate on my classes, my mind couldn’t focus on anything other than Azusa for more than a couple of minutes. It was a good thing that English was the first class as well as being the only one I could stand to lose focus on without fear of falling awfully behind—apparently the emphasis on learning English was even more intense in France than it was here. There was a cold weight in my gut, like I’d forced down two litres of ice water at once. No matter what, the familiar feeling of foreboding wouldn’t leave my pounding head be.

Once class had finished I hastily grabbed the homework assignment and headed out into the hallways. The English lecturer always let us out late, so the hallways were emptier than usual, making it clear that my bumping into Azusa was no more accidental than my ‘forgetting’ breakfast every morning for the past three years.

He seemed happy to see me, and his dull eyes brightened up considerably. The cold feeling in my stomach intensified upon the realisation that there was nobody else in the hallway to save me.

“Ah, Elita-san…don’t you…have class?”

Well done, Captain Obvious.

“Don’t you?”

Oddly, Azusa’s smile grew wider, “Let’s…walk together…”

Knowing that I didn’t have a choice, I let my tired feet carry me towards the art room. I held the sketchbook against my chest like shield—maybe it would be enough to stop Azusa grabbing an inter-class snack.

Ridiculous.

It was like holding the covers over your head when you were a child and the radiator rattled ominously. After my time with Azusa, I questioned whether there was something with black clawed hands hiding under the bed after all. Maybe my parents fed it the leftovers to stop in crunching through dangling legs in the dark.

Finally, we’d arrived in front of my classroom. It was a relief to see the warm light and relative bustle of the class as people gathered art materials and handed their assignments in to the teacher. I turned to Azusa, smiling a little in hopes that he’d leave faster if I didn’t appear so completely miserable.

“Thanks, Azusa-kun. I have to go into class now.”

“Oh…”

The longer that grin stayed on his face, the more nervous I got. Had he organised a vampire party into my art class as some sort of sick prank that would eventually be uploaded to BestGore? Or was it more like ‘everyone you see is dead and being manipulated by a morbid puppeteer’.

He opened the door and looked at me, the smile still on his face. I entered cautiously, ready to drop
my shit and run as soon as everyone in the room bared their fangs. Strangely, Azusa didn’t go whichever way his next class was, and followed in behind me. Knowing that he had limited powers if the students in the room weren’t his wicked familiars, I turned back to see his smile yet again.

What was so damn funny?

I’d never been a fan of not being in the know nurses whispering about the ugly figures on the scale and around my waist and my heart rate immediately began to pick up. Was he going to laugh at me? Was there something blindly obvious that I was missing?

“Don’t you have class, Azusa-kun?”

“This is…my class…”

Oh Lord above.

Honestly I don’t know what I expected. If the gigantic mansion was anything to go by, whoever Azusa’s parents were had enough money to let him get away with setting the science block on fire, let alone a simple class change. The lecturer, who was typically reserved, smiled when they saw Azusa. Maybe he had done some ass-kissing. As slow as he seemed, there was no doubt in my mind that he knew just how to get what he wanted.

“Ah, Duval-san, were you showing Mukami-san the way to class?” The lecturer smiled, motioning for us to take a seat. Class had already started, and no doubt he wanted to get on with reviewing our work. While there was a relative level of freedom with our briefs, he still had to make sure the work was of a high standard.

“Yes…she helped me…” Azusa answered naturally, sitting down at the desk and putting his sketchbook down in front of him. From the thickness of the crinkled pages, it was obvious it was well loved. Despite everything, it piqued my curiosity, and I watched as he flicked through his previous projects to the middle of the book.

“I tried to use…artists from a large time frame…” He spoke a lot more fluently, with less obvious pauses. Maybe he was comfortable, flipping through the textured pages of his work. Every so often his hand would reach out to stroke a section textured with oil paint dreamily.

“Here’s Munch… I like ‘The Inheritance….The cool colours…are nice…”

The glazed-over eyes of the syphilis-ridden child made me shudder. Something about it felt… morbid, getting a mother and child to pose while both were rotting from the inside out.

He flipped over the page. This was obviously inspired by a photographer. Each print of the photographer’s work was on glossy paper, and annotated until the work below was difficult to distinguish from the scribbles.

Azusa’s smile was replaced by something far more focused, “I saw Sonia… Sonia Firlej in a book…I like her use…of texture.”

Although the works themselves were not nearly as tactile as those of Munch, they pictured cling-film and cigarette smoke and piles of soggy leaves next to shiny-shoed feet. They seemed innocent, but something about them seemed… off.

They were pretty people made to look ugly.
The pages turned from stark white to muddy grey. The art as definitely more familiar than that of the photographer- I’d know those spirals anywhere.

“Junji Ito… is more contemporary…than the others…”

Azusa and the lecturer continued to discuss the artists he’d chosen. Most of it went over my head- none of my basic Japanese workbooks went into the depth required for discussing art, so I flipped my own book open and began to flip through the pages. As much as I hated to admit, it was nice having somebody next to me so that the lecturer didn’t quietly question whether I was okay in that special voice reserved for the mentally ill, even if it was Azusa.

My talk with the lecturer was far shorter (understandably, seeing my book was about a third as thick as my companions) but at least he seemed to like Théodore Géricault as much as I did.

“I like his series on ‘portraits of the insane’, and his morgue studies,” I commented quietly. The lecturer nodded along, watching as I gestured at the sloppy characters in the book. Hopefully I hadn’t written dodgy pirate erotica unknowingly. There was always a paranoid niggle in my brain that all of the language-learning CDs and booklets and apps were teaching the language incorrectly on purpose.

*Don’t be ridiculous. If people wanted to talk about you, they could do it without some secret language. They already are. What do you think they whisper about when you walk in anyway?*

I had a good point after all. My desire to fly under the radar meant that, apart from Yui, the only person I knew in school well enough to talk to was Azusa, and he wasn’t exactly conventional either.

Leaving Azusa and I alone to go and talk to the other students, the lecturer smiled and gave me a thumbs up. I smiled weakly back, appreciating not having to struggle through a conversation. Avoiding contact wasn’t the way to improve language skills, but I was pleased none the less.

“Elita-san… take this…”

Silently Azusa had pulled out a children’s lunchbox with a cartoon bird on the lid along with a small, metal bottle. The thud on the table made me jump, and I instinctively leaned away from him.

“Sorry….”

“No, it’s ok…what’s in the box though.”

Smiling again, he slowly undid the zip. Inside was what looked like wholesome, hand prepared food, the little tinfoil bundles carefully packed together.

The sight was enough to make my stomach twist into knots. There was no way in hell I’d let that shit near me. Even if there weren’t ‘extra ingredients’ inside the supposedly innocent parcels, I didn’t have to reveal their contents to know it would defile my clean, pink insides.

Nobody understood. My body liked to be empty.

If it didn’t, how come I studied for longer, trained harder, even spent more time out with my little sisters, sipping vitamin water as they ate strawberry ice cream? No matter what the doctors said, or how my heart hammered in my chest whenever I bent over, I knew it was how I was meant to exist. Just for me.
The well-worn black dress and shoes which hung in my wardrobe, ready to slip on like a suit of armour whenever those calls came.

I wouldn't die. Not until I wanted to. I was in control.

“It’s… cheese and salad… and I put some… spicy sauce in it…” He explained slowly, motioning towards the roll-shaped bundle. His scarred hands went to the metal bottle. “And this… is cranberry juice…”

It would’ve been charming if he hadn’t known what I liked by going through my things while I was unconscious. The thought was completely irrational—since when did I talk about food, let alone carry it around with me— but it still made the nausea bubbling in the pit of my stomach worse. Surely it was some lucky guessing, unless the whole ‘mindreading’ thing in vampire mythology was true.

“It’s good…. For blood…”

Ah.

That was it.

I shifted in my seat, trying not to appear ungrateful. Even in this completely ridiculous situation, the etiquette my mother had drilled into me took priority over how I wanted to scream over the fucking insanity of everything. It sounded like a children’s book—‘Lunch with a vampire!’

The next time I saw my little sisters, I’d be sure to tell them a realistic vampire story, about pretty boys with sad eyes that force fed you so they could feed on you in turn.

If I ever saw them again.

“This looks lovely Azusa-kun, but I said I’d eat with Yui-san.”

He perked up, and his soft eyes suddenly felt like they were probing my face. Come to think of it, he’d commented about Yui the first time I bumped into him. Azusa wasn’t one of her shitty roommates, so how did he know her?

“I should’ve… made her some… too…” Azusa frowned. He seemed genuinely concerned. Come to think of it, she looked so tired recently, so some decent food would do her good. She was beautiful—delicate features and flawless skin, like a doll—so she had no reason to avoid it. Yui could consume pure arsenic and still glow. Especially next to the murk the school was apparently full of.

Suddenly, a wave of annoyance washed over me. Who the fuck was bothering Yui, probably the sweetest person I’d ever meet. Who’d harass her to the point where she had trouble sleeping.

“It’s okay Azusa-kun, I made some biscuits today,” I said, nudging my bag with my foot. He looked down, slightly surprised.

Wanting to get as many of the nasty lumps of tissue biscuits out of my hands as possible, I reached down into the bag and pulled out the bag. As soon as I opened the box I smelled sweet lemons, and my mouth flooded with saliva. Azusa had given me so many of those spice biscuits, it was only fair that he accepted some of my own.

He smiled again, pulling his biscuit-filled hands closer towards him, “Thank you… Elita-san…”
The lecturer clapped his hands together, telling us what he expected in our sketchbooks by the
deadline next week. I scribbled it down in pencil and packed up my belongings as quickly as I
could. Maybe, if I hurried out, I could pretend I’d forgotten the lunch packed-
“Elita-san…”

Fuck.

Grimacing, I turned around, and took the lunch from Azusa. He still smelled like lemons, and was
still smiling as well. Oddly, it felt nice.

It was the smug satisfaction of passing food on without partaking in any myself, that was all.

The school buildings formed a ring, in the middle of which was a garden, filled with night-
blooming flowers and moths thudding lazily against the lights lining the pathways.
As she promised, Yui was sat underneath a pear tree, looking intently at something in her hand. I
could only make out that it was a scrap of paper or a photograph before she noticed me and quickly
slipped it into her textbook.

“Good evening, Elita-san,” she smiled, tugging at the corners of my mouth until they matched hers.

My friendships had always been based on competition. Back at dance school it was who would get
a featured role; who could get their leg the highest on the ballet bar; who could appear the most
melancholy with only the wave of an arm.

Then it was hospital. Who could do the most sit-ups in our allocated fifteen minutes of shower
time; who could tuck the most food into their loose bras and under sagging waistbands. Some girls
had been there so long they’d managed to scratch out hiding places in the underside of the bathtub,
so long their teeth had begun to loosen in their swollen sockets.

Yui was neither. She didn’t want to better me or humiliate me (not that I knew of anyway) so I sat
next to her with a smile. My eyes only momentarily slid to her tiny wrists and focused on her kind
eyes instead.

“I have the lemon biscuits. I…baked them?”

Stupidly, I’d been slacking on my language learning ever since the whole Azusa-incident had
occurred. It was difficult to concentrate on anything other than the numbers that ticked through my
head constantly, and the numbing fear of something I couldn’t understand.

They smelled just as good as they had in class, and my mouth watered again.

Yui reached out and delicately took one of the biscuits. I left the box open, but nudged it towards
her, and busied my hands with screwing and unscrewing the lid on the bottle of cranberry juice.

No way was I actually going to drink it.

We sat in silence for a while, until Yui coughed quietly. When I turned, her ruby eyes were filled
with caution, snapping my attention fully away from the moths dancing from flower to flower, and
the bats that swooped down and snatched them out of the air with mean jaws.

“Elita-san, you… you’re quite close with Azusa-kun?”

I shrugged, “Close is one way to put it.”

“Has he…” clearly Yui was struggling to find words simple enough for me to understand, “Done
anything strange?"

My hand moved to my neck, fingering the soft fabric of the choker subconsciously. If anyone in the world would believe me, it would be Yui.

I had to trust somebody, or I’d go insane.

“This is going to sound weird,” I warned. I didn’t even have the basic vocabulary to say what had happened, not all of the ins and outs and intricacies that resulted in me admiring a boy’s (who I didn’t even know that well) knife collection.

“Azusa bit me?”

I pulled the choker down slightly and wiped rigorously at the concealer hiding the sickly yellow bruise and the puncture mark itself. Yui paled.

Her eyes grew so sad so quickly it was like I was seeing another person entirely. Something about it seemed so…hopeless. I hated seeing Yui, who paired up with the strange girl who couldn’t speak Japanese on a presentation project hopeless.

“Did you know?” I asked. Yui was clever. She didn’t seem confused or curious or suspicious- there was no way she didn’t know.

Yui nodded, shutting her eyes. Her hands were clutching her necklace so tight they were shaking.

Her shitty roommates. Going to a night school. There was already one family of vampires at the academy, so it wasn’t the largest stretch of the imagination to consider there being more.

“Is that why you’re tired?”

Tired was only the beginning of it- she looked like every shred of strength had been sapped out of her before school had even began, but I didn’t know how to say it. I’d have to work more, even if it was just to talk with Yui more.

She nodded again. I impulsively reached out and grabbed her hands with my own. Her eyes snapped open again, and my desperation at the whole situation came flooding out. I wasn’t insane. I wasn’t falling for some weird trick.

“Come with me to France. We can get out. My parents will understand, I’ll teach you French.”

Finally, Yui smiled, her expression worthy of a Renaissance painting it was so serene.

Still waters run deep.

“I can’t. I have to stay, to learn about why I was sent there in the first place. To learn about my father.”

I looked at her in complete awe. Now her hands had relaxed slightly, I saw the gilded edges of her crucifix.

“I must be strong, Elita-san. I must have faith that God will give me strength to carry on.”

As admirable as her faith was, I frowned slightly. Was she fucking insane? Had they planted nasty ideas that she couldn’t leave?

“Yui, they’re dangerous. Even living with strange humans is dangerous. Please, come with me.”
Finally, she smiled again, and everything felt a little less awful, “They’re hurting a lot, but they need to stop taking it out on me.”

It was all very well saying how nice they were, but Yui was actually living with more than one vampire. Even Azusa, who seemed gentle despite everything, could snap my neck like a twig. I couldn’t let her dodge the issue, even if she did want to find out about her father.

I leaned a little closer to her, “Can you leave?”

She paused, and her smile faltered before returning, “It doesn’t matter. I stayed to find out what is going on, and I will stay until I do.”

I’d seen that reckless determination before, that drive that made people move mountains and made Hercules choose a life of trial over a life of ease. There was no doubt in her mind.

She couldn’t leave, and I couldn’t go back either.

My mother would be proved right- her eldest daughter couldn’t live on her own. I couldn’t succeed in dance or basic academia or being a good sibling. I couldn’t go back, not while I saw my old classmate’s beautiful, waifish faces staring at me from every theatre and every phone booth.

I couldn’t go back fat.

I’d rather die in Japan than survive in France, my skin bursting at the seams.

“Well…” I trailed off, unsure, “Let me help you then. I’ll help you find your father.”

Her genuine smile returned, and the pounding in my heart began to slow.

“You’re a help just being here, Elita-san.”

“Well… you’re taking the biscuits,” I insisted, pushing the box over to Yui. She slipped her hand into the box and lifted another biscuit to her mouth before I clipped the lid on tightly.

The talk at lunch left my head so heavy I could barely concentrate on where I was going. It seemed Yui was in an even worse situation than mine, and there were more than four vampires in the school. I was conscious of people staring before, but now every curious look in the hallway and glance over the shoulder in class made me want to curl up into a ball.

I was relieved to be home (the lunch Azusa packed handed to a homeless man- it would be a shame to waste it) still as empty as when the day started. Not a single crumb had passed my lips, and that warranted a reward.

My muscles ached so much even sitting on the bed was a major effort. After changing into my pyjamas and brushing my teeth, I curled up in bed with Gloom and Grimm and my laptop. The warm weight on my stomach was a welcome distraction from the familiar aches that came with starvation not filling myself with unnecessary shit.

When I logged onto my school email, there were three unopened messages, each with blinking red exclamation marks tomorrow.

“Hey, Gloom, stay quiet if you think I should read those tomorrow.”
Silence.

I chuckled to myself. Good bunny.

Quickly, I sent a message to Yui, inviting her to meet after school.

My brain flickered.

Although I knew I should open the emails, some strange feeling stopped me doing so. It was a sense of…foreboding.

Pandora’s nausea before she opened the box.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys. I'm sorry for the generally poor quality of this chapter, and the time it took for me to update. Really, I wanted to spend more time with Yui and generally improve on my characterisation but ya girl is v sad. Stay safe everyone <3
Hey everyone. As a warning, this chapter explicitly mentions and discusses eating-disorder related death and assault. Proceed with caution.

On a brighter note, I'd like to say a big thank you to my friend @Biffmanly and Sara (she does not have an AO3 account) for their incredible depictions of Elita. It's such an honour that such talented creative minds would draw the goblin child. I love them both very much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I knew the undead existed long before Azusa pinned me against the wall and sank his teeth into my shoulder.

Jean saw himself as a philosopher, and told me about Schroedinger’s cat on a long drive two summers ago. Over the course of an hour, a series of events may or may not occur, which leads to the cat’s death. Until the box is opened, and either a dead or pissed off cat is revealed, it is dead and alive simultaneously. Although Jean missed the scientific point of the thought experiment- a physicist under-graduate Jean was not- the uncertainty of the cat stayed with me to the point where I had dreams of my rabbits being trapped in a similar situation.

I’d completely forgotten about the emails flashing in my inbox. My main concern was forcing down three orange segments in the morning so I could take my neglected meds and deciding between two and three pairs of tights (it seemed muggy outside). Gloom and Grimm’s litterbox needed cleaning, and the rubbish chute was out of service, so I had to trek downstairs with a plastic bag full of what I was sure would be first-class fertiliser.

In fact, it was a certainty that the emails would remain unanswered had I not gone into the library to print something off during lunchtime.

It was strange what a week could do to you. Although me and my poor Japanese stood out whenever I had to talk to somebody, but I could walk across the library without people staring at me, and navigate the school website without getting a headache.

Seeing the emails blink at me for the second day in a row filled me with the same dread as a nurse tightening the blood-pressure cuff around my wrist.

The email was in French. Somebody from home had messaged me.

**Hello Elita.**

**This is Mrs Brodeur, Brienne’s mother.**

*I am very sorry to have to tell you this. It has been very difficult for my husband and I to write this email.*

*Brienne was home for the first time in a year. We had a lovely dinner, and then we all went to sleep.*
Unfortunately, Brienne had a seizure in the night, followed by a cardiac arrest. The doctors said it was refeeding syndrome.

She used to talk about you a lot, and how you spoke a lot in hospital. We have something we think she’d have liked you to have.

We’d like to talk with you on the telephone soon. We understand it is hard, but it would help us a lot.

We are very sorry.

Mrs Brodeur

The words began to blur together, and suddenly my chest felt so tight I could barely breath. My hands were gripping the edge of the desk so hard it felt like my knuckles would split my skin like overripe fruit. It was too much.

The pressure in my chest was building so high I felt like I’d split in two. A long, strangled sob left me when a cold hand rested on my shoulder, like a release valve had been opened. My hands flew to my face.

“Elita-san…”

Accepting the hands that guided me out of my seat and then out of the library completely, I continued to sob so hard I thought I’d throw up.

How long had she been dead?

How long had the outside matched the inside?

Finally, whoever was guiding me stopped walking, and I sank to my knees weakly. We must’ve walked a while, because from the feel of the cold tiling we were in the cooking suite on the other side of the campus from the library. My shoulders were still shaking, and when I spoke my voice had that typical rough texture I always got after crying.

“Azusa?”

Manners flew out the window as I looked up at him.

“What happened…?”

He knelt down to talk to me. The words were thick and heavy with a reality I’d tried to abandon.

“My friend from hospital died.”

The food poisoned her. Her insides were pink and clean and she was living until they stuffed her tore her at the seams.

I started crying again, and when Azusa shuffled closer to me I didn’t move away. It was awful, but I couldn’t stand the thought of my family turning Brienne into a warning of what could happen to me. I didn’t want my mother and father to talk about therapy and pills when we all knew I’d lie. Not when we all knew they’d let themselves believe it.

“Let’s go…”

For once, I had no argument. We made our way down to the front of the school, me still sobbing until my insides hurt, and the car pulled up almost immediately. He was holding my shoulder
gently, sitting me down in the car and murmuring something to the driver I couldn’t hear over my raspy breaths.

I didn’t move when he sat so close to me I could feel my hairs raising from the cold, and I leaned into him when he patted my hair. There was nobody else, and everything I’d been burying was scratching through the dirt, fingernails scrabbling against the weak wood of their coffins.

“Oh my fucking god, oh my god she’s dead Azusa, she’s fucking dead and she won’t come back they’re going to put her in a hole in the ground and let worms eat through her—”

My babbling was incoherent to actual French people, so it was likely that I was just gibbering to Azusa. The feeling of his eyes on me made me cringe away from him, but he just reached over and pulled me close enough to tickle my nose with his blazer. My body remembered the last time he had his hands on me and froze uselessly, doing nothing to stop Azusa running his hands soothing through my hair but managing to make me choke on my own saliva.

But, it wasn’t the worst thing. I hadn’t touched another person for over a month.

Brienne convulsing in bed, alone, while her parents talked downstairs about how well she was doing

As I considered slicing off my own arms to stop myself being so pitiful, it felt like I was watching my own body move on its own. My treacherous arms reached out and wound around his neck, tugging myself into a more comfortable crying position.

I couldn’t stand to be alone.

Weak cunt.

Slowly, Azusa shifted, pressing his face into the crook of my neck. I tensed momentarily, preparing myself for the sharp pain that was sure to follow, but nothing happened. His breath was cold against my neck, but that was all.

Even if he did bite me I couldn’t leave, I couldn’t go back to the flat with the rest of those emails waiting for me.

With how close I was, I could smell the metallic undertone of his scent beneath the fresh mint smell. I could hear his slightly raspy breathing in my ear, probably due to whatever gave him the gigantic scar on his face and whatever made him speak so slowly. He sounded like the girls who would mysteriously disappear to the bathroom for exactly six minutes after meals smelling of mint with swollen cheeks.

Did Brienne do that? Was she always empty, or did the tide rush in and out of her, wearing the hole until the walls were smooth and children could come in freely to pick at her sides?

Did she have a distended stomach and worn teeth? Did she hoard poison wrapped in bright papers to keep them away from her, or to devour in the middle of the night when she didn’t have to be strong anymore?

Then I realised that I didn’t know Brienne at all. I knew her as a reflection of myself. I knew her how everyone in the hospital knew everyone else.

Sick.

Not sick, strong. She wasn’t strong enough though.

My cheeks were oddly sticky after the crying, like I’d smeared my face in syrup. It was unbearable,
and when the car pulled up to the house it took considerable willpower not to dunk my head in the elaborate fountain, slap-bang in the middle of the gravel path that glowed in the moonlight like the pebbles in ‘Hansel and Gretel’.

The fact Azusa was still holding onto me, keeping my weak legs steady, didn’t bother me. My mind was hazy with exhaustion, and the regular feeling of cold air and the pressure of his arm around my shoulders kept my mind from floating up into the sky like a stray balloon.

By the time we’d climbed the stairs and navigated our way down the labyrinth of hallways, I was ready to sleep. Although I’d spent the last forty minutes sobbing, I could tell from the cold weight in my stomach that I hadn’t accepted Brienne’s fate, not really.

I perked up enough to scan the area outside of Azusa’s room for any evidence of my last visit. The gilt wallpaper was spotless, and the bloody smears I was certain I’d left over the table in the hall were completely gone. It made sense for a house that huge to have maids- especially considering that the four occupants I knew of were all essentially teenage boys- but there was never any sign of life. No footsteps, no muffled conversation, no trolleys with feather dusters and unmarked bottles of bleach.

*How often did they have to clean if the brothers were constantly bringing girls back and letting them bleed all over the walls?*

The door creaked shut, separating me from thoughts of maids and detergent. Azusa lead me to the bed, and I followed weakly, too tired to try and fight with a literal vampire. He peeled back the duvet and I clambered in. The feel of my own clammy skin was making me feel uncomfortable.

*Was Brienne still warm when they found her? Or was her skin more corpse-coloured rubber than flesh?*

*Stop.*

The bed springs creaked, and I felt cold arms wrap around me once more. Although my own lack of resistance towards somebody who was so blatantly manipulating me was sickening, I needed it. I needed the most basic comforts of a child with nightmares that didn't stop.

If he wanted me for blood and bone, then that was none of my business.

“What…happened to them…?” He asked behind me, his cool breath teasing my straw hair.

Clearing my throat in an unsuccessful attempt to make my voice sound less Kermit-like, I thought for a moment. I didn't think I’d moved onto ‘medical terminology’ level Japanese yet, and it was hard enough to go in depth concerning a dead girl.

“If you don’t eat for a long time, and then eat again, you get sick.”

My eyes were welling up again, but I felt him nod, so I continued.

“Her… her heart? Her heart didn’t like food, so it stopped.”

The silence was like a vacuum, drawing the thoughts therapists /dreamed/ of unlocking out to dirty the air.

“She won’t be a person anymore. She’ll just be a dead person.”

“You don’t want to… forget them… Elita-san?” He asked, tilting his head. I was so focused on the awful ache inside of me I barely noticed the shift of the bed as he got up, or the quiet squeal of the display cabinet door.

“No. I can’t, I can’t forget them.”

Would I be forgotten too?

“I know… how you can… remember her…”

The bed settled again and I turned my head to face him. Immediately, I tried to get up, but the blankets tangled around my legs were heavy, and my mind was slow. The blade glinted in the cool light of his room.

“Please Azusa, please don’t,” I begged, knowing deep down that, blankets or no blankets, there was no way to escape him.

Finally, I thrashed around enough to send myself over the edge of the bed, taking a clump of bedding with me. The thump winded me, sending me even further into a state of panic. Despite their desperate scrabbling, my arms were too weak to pull myself up after I’d tired myself out sobbing. My heart began the tell-tale arrhythmic thumping of a palpitation.

The adrenaline in my mouth tasted of warm pennies.

With frightening strength Azusa ripped the bedding aside, rolling me over onto my side in the process. In a desperate attempt to make Azusa back off I reached back, first ripping the beanie off of his head, and then tearing at his hair. The feeling of such muscle-aching force and then nothing as I successfully tore out a clump of his soft hair released the valve inside of me.

In a wave of fear I didn’t think possible, bile and green tea flooded up my oesophagus and out of my mouth onto the plush blue carpet and something humiliatingly hot spilled from my bladder, soaking my legs.

His cold hands lifted up my shirt.

Mercifully, my vision began to fade, and I prayed that I wouldn’t be conscious for whatever was about to happen to me. I didn’t want to remember. The flecks of black in my eyes grew larger and more opaque, and I was ready to give up and rest when a searing pain bought me back to reality.

It was definite- it began just below the third rib and etched down the fatty tissues of my abdomen, coming to a stop at my hip. For a split second it was raw, unadulterated agony, and then came the sickly warmth. It flowed from the gash like rain from a watershed, down the valleys of my skin into the carpet.

Would they forget me when I died?

Next came something much more sickly. I could feel Azusa’s weight on my legs, holding me in place as his greedy mouth suckled at my skin. Once again I reached down, clawing at what I assumed was the delicate nose and the droopy eyes of the monster that would inevitably eat me alive. The feeling of blood building under my nails was almost satisfying until I heard a quiet whimper.

“Elita-san… hurt me more…”

The wave of black that washed over me left no time for thought. I’d been to the Mukami household twice. I’d passed out there twice.
Two for two.

God must’ve decided not to punish me for my sins, because I when I woke up I was in my own bed. The aching pain running from my ribs to my hip was coupled with a pressure that made it hard to breath, and I was oddly damp, but I was in bed. Gloom and Grimm were up on the bed with me, pressed up against my face, which meant that I had to have been there for a long time.

However, God hadn’t forgotten all of my lies and manipulation and that time I took a friend’s ballet shoes, because Azusa was sat at the kitchen table, polishing every sharp object in the house. I immediately held my breath, which naturally attracted his attention. He smiled at me like he hadn’t stabbed me hours (days? Weeks?) before, still holding onto the knife that was sharp from lack of use.

“Ah…Elita-san…you’re up…”

Reluctantly I began to sit up, wincing from the sickly pain radiating from my side. The rabbits sat up, staring wearily at Azusa. Grimm, who’d always been more cautious than Gloom, thumped his back foot against the mattress and sprung onto the floor. Gloom’s eyes were wide, and she followed her friend’s lead into the small hide.

“Why am I wet?”

Did he let me roll around in my own piss? I sniffed at myself, but there was just a faint smell of lavender, not urine.

Oh god.

“Did you wash me?”

I tugged the covers down to my knees. My middle was completely encased in clean gauze that crinkled whenever I moved. My uniform was probably being sold to perverts on eBay, because it sure as hell wasn’t on me. I’d been changed into my pajamas, which still smelled enough like rabbit and dust to stop me suffering from complete sensory overload.

Apparently Azusa didn’t see the problem. He frowned, putting down the knife he was holding, “I couldn’t leave you…you were dirty…”

Covered in piss and blood because you stabbed me.

I wished he’d done a better job and just put me out of my misery. The horror of knowing I’d been half dead passed out while he was touching me made my upset stomach threaten to empty itself once more.

My epiglottis would disappear at this rate.

“You need to get out. Now.”

It felt like yelling at a puppy for chewing on the furniture. His face was the perfect picture of earnest innocence.

I knew better though.

He’d fucking heard me when I told him not to cut me.
“But…Brienne is…here now…”

I stayed quiet, staring across the room.

“That’s…what you wanted…no?”

Azusa walked over and I brought my knees up to my chest, ignoring the jab of pain along my side as best as I could. His pale hand gestured towards my bandaged side, where the sudden movements had caused a tinge of pink to mar the pure white.

“Brienne’s…there…”

“A cut isn’t my dead friend you…you-“

Shit.

“Fils de pute!”*

Why hadn’t I just googled Japanese swearwords like most dumb teenagers?

Firmly, Azusa pushed me back down, the threat of real force evident despite his sad expression.

“Rest…you’ll thank me… in the morning…”

“Ta Gueule.”**

"You'll...understand..."

Seeing as I was exhausted and not completely motivated by spite, I let him tuck the covers in around me. As hard as my brain willed my muscles to get up just to be difficult, the promise of a decent rest was far too tempting. Azusa was leaving, and the rabbits were safe. The familiar environment combined with the blood loss to create a concoction potent enough to slip my eyes shut. A moment later, the door to the flat clicked shut.

I could’ve slept for a thousand years.

Brienne didn’t have a choice.

*Translated meaning- ‘son of whore’

**Translated meaning- shut up, shut the hell up, etc

Chapter End Notes

I looked at Azusa's room from the game and it's oddly endearing with the tiny little bed and the tall cabinet full of knives. Sorry this took so long. I'm not very happy with my writing lately. I am tired. Hmu if you can spot the 'Brave New World' reference. Soon, I hope to start a series of fun AUs where Azusa and Elita can dick around. What do you guys think about that?

Thank you all for your support <3 stay safe
After Azusa left I spent the next hour sewing little pockets into the insides of my bra (it was basically a vest top- there was nothing there to support) and my rattiest pair of underwear. I would wear them for one purpose only, and according to the conditions my parents had set out what seemed like a lifetime ago, I’d only be wearing them once every two weeks. On the bedside table were tiny weights, each only 20g, but added together enough to make convincing the doctor any weight loss was a result of stress that slightest bit easier.

I did my best to keep my mind off Brienne, one of the nicer girls on the ward, even if she blamed me for hidden biscuit stash, and ‘Brienne’, the gigantic fucking cut that made it hard to sit comfortably. I was actively avoiding fishing my phone out from between the bed and the small table, knowing when I did I’d have no excuse not to answer it and probably talk to my mother about how this would ‘influence’ me.

Satisfied with my work, I slipped the weights into the tiny pockets and carefully wormed my clothes on, making sure not to disturb the bandages or the impromptu pockets.

Despite spending half my entire life in doctor’s offices, I felt anxious. After being effectively nocturnal for so long, going outside when the sun was high in the sky felt…strange, like a dream.

It took me twenty minutes to find the practice which was supposedly five minutes away.

Apparently the guide to making patients feel ‘at ease’ was international. The reception was dotted with potted plants and abstract pictures. It was hot, to keep the sick children alive, but it still smelled like a morgue- or what I imagined one to smell like. Smiling, the receptionist asked for my name, and gratefully didn’t flinch when I fucked up my Japanese. She signed me in and motioned for me to sit with the other miserable people.

With a sick satisfaction, I noted that I was the thinnest of the other stick-girls in the waiting room. It must’ve been my imagination playing up, but I swore I could hear the quiet clinks of the weights knocking together.

“Duval-san?” A woman in a smart blue suit smiled. The familiar ‘heading for the gallows’ feeling returned as I walked into her office. One wall was lined with shelves. I could only understand a quarter of the titles, which was probably a good thing- it would shake me if I saw ‘How to spot compulsive liars’ by ‘God knows what you’ve done Johnson’.

The armchair was so soft I felt like a prawn sinking into an anemone.

“So, Duval-san, I’m Doctor Yamamato. Hopefully we’ll get to know each other well.”

I nodded, deliberately staying silent. My past psychiatrists usually liked to pressure you into talking by remaining quiet, which was useful. I didn’t want to say anything, and if there was nothing to reply to then I wouldn’t seem rude.

“Why don’t we take a look at your treatment plan today?”

*How much money so I can sit and pick lint off of the chair?*

She opened the embarrassingly thick folder in front of her and studied it for a moment, giving me
time to steady myself. I’d been to thousands of appointments, the fact that this one was in Japan made no difference.

Another moment passed before she motioned towards a divider illustrated with pale flowers, “There’s a robe back there if you’d care to change for your weigh-in, Duval-san.” I nodded and got up. The robe was baby yellow and (deliberately, I’m sure) very thin. No doubt they’d weighed it beforehand. After stripping I stepped out from behind the divider, and ‘miraculously’ a scale had appeared by Doctor Yamamato’s desk. It was a medical one, made with cold steel and a dial that couldn’t be tampered with, no matter how long your nails.

“If you’d care to step forward Duval-san, I just need to find something,” the doctor smiled before heading to the stuffed bookshelf.

Maybe she’s finding a fairy tale, one where two little children get lost in the forest.

How did it end?

Somebody got roasted alive. The witch? Or the fat little boy?

My tired eyes focused on the needle as it arched past the acceptable numbers, flying into the realm of sulfur and rot.

I couldn’t survive at such high numbers, with so much fat sticking to me, surely?

The doctor returned and took down the nasty little numbers.

45k.5g

I went and changed as told- I was happy to, the robe obviously wasn’t meant to keep you warm- and sat back in the anemone chair.

“So, Duval-san,” Doctor Yamamato prompted, delicately taking her glasses off and letting them dangle from the chain around her neck, “What do you think about your weight?”

I’d rehearsed this for as long as I could remember.

I leaned forward, the picture of earnestness, “Honestly, I am…disappointed. The stress of moving must’ve made me lose more than I thought it would.”

My usual script had to change because I could barely speak Japanese, but the message was still there. I wanted to recover, and any low figures were totally on accident.

“Thank you for being honest with me, Duval-san,” she smiled with her perfectly white teeth. “What do you think would help you gain your weight back?”

Pretending to consider the question for a moment, I wrung my hands, focusing on the jutting bones of my wrists I’d worked so hard for.

“A new meal plan maybe?”

“Did you bring your plan with you? We can make some adjustments from that.”

Being a practiced professional at these appointments, I pulled out the grid that promised me energy and happiness but just made me want to shit out my insides whenever I followed it.
Clearing my throat, I pointed towards the empty space between my ‘lunch’ and my ‘dinner’, “Maybe something there?”

We worked together for a while, adding some nutritious snacks that I wouldn’t eat into the gaps in my schedule. In between suggestions, when the only sound in the room was the scratching of pen on paper, I eyed the clock on the wall.

At least those were the same in Japan.

Finally the little bell rang on her desk, indicating that my half-hour introductory session had ended. It was hard not to sling my bag over my shoulder and straight-up skip out of the office.

“It was nice to meet you,” I said, bowing slightly.

“Look after yourself, Duval-san. Your next appointment is in two weeks,” Doctor Yamamato waved goodbye, already tucking the copy of my meal plan she’d photocopied into my thick paper file.

Immediately I headed to the pet shop and which smelled of dog treats and bought two rabbit toys as an apology for being away. I knew Gloom and Grimm wouldn’t understand if I tried to explain the world of creepy vampires and night schools, but they loved forage balls.

And, conveniently, the purchase left me with no money to buy anything else. I walked through the bustling market, not so much as stopping to look at the piles of fresh fruit and vegetables or the iced fish. Despite my confidence that nothing would slip into my bag against my will, there was something urging me home. It made me shiver under my three layers of clothing.

Bolt done, appointment over, rabbits occupied with burying into the dried grass to find the nuggets of carrot and dandelion, I flopped down on the bed.

Reluctantly, I wormed my hand down the side of my bed and fished around for my phone. If I didn’t contact my mother for much longer she’d definitely call for a wellness check. The mere thought of some random people knowing how fucked up I was made my heart rate pick up.

When my phone turned on the screen was flooded with missed calls and messages. I tapped my password in and paused, taking a deep breath before pressing the little green icon next to my mother’s name.

The phone rang twice, and I held my breath, praying that she was away and I could just leave a message confirming was alive when the ringing stopped.

“Elita? God, don’t you ever turn your phone on?”

She sounded exasperated; I subconsciously tucked my legs under my chin, protecting the soft flab of my stomach from her tone.

“Haven’t you learned anything? We get worried when you don’t pick up-“

“Hi Mum,” I interrupted. ‘Mum’ was a deliberate attempt to calm her down. She was always more of a ‘Mother’ in my eyes, but she liked the affection that came with ‘Mum’. Talking in my mother-tongue felt oddly uncomfortable.

I heard her deep breath over the phone- probably accompanied with a count to ten to calm herself.

“Elita, have you heard?”
Her voice was softer now.

“About Brienne? Yeah, I heard yesterday. I needed some time to compute it,” I replied, suddenly feeling exhausted.

There was a shuffling sound, “Oh darling…”

For some reason I found her pitying tone more annoying than her criticism. I grit my teeth, “It’s sad, but I hadn’t spoken to her in months. I’m fine- just ask Doctor Yamamato-“

“Elita, it’s only natural to feel sad. Let yourself mourn.”

*How can you mourn somebody who was dead from the beginning?*

Now I was the one counting to ten.

“Elita?”

“Her parents said they have something to send me, do you know about that?” I asked.

I could almost hear the cogs in my mother’s brain turning, “Something of hers? Did you ever say you liked something she had?”

“I don’t think so,” I shook my head.

Mother lowered the phone for a moment, and I managed to catch the soft music in the room.

Gloom and Grimm were pushing their treat ball back and forth over the floor.

“Anyway, darling, I was thinking about increasing your appointments to once a week.”

My legs were tucked so close into my chest they were starting to cramp, “There’s no need Mum. Besides, I’m busy, so I’m not sure I’ll have time.”

The suspicion in her voice was obvious, “Busy? Did you start dance lessons again? I’ll send some more money if you need it.”

“No, no, just schoolwork and DBT and meeting up with my friends,” I replied, ignoring the suggestion that I’d dance again. I couldn’t do it, not when I was so hideous.

“Ooh, tell me about these friends,” she prompted.

Finally, I stretched out my legs, convinced that the talk of extra therapy had been forgotten- for now at least- “There’s a girl called Yui Komori in my history class who I eat lunch with. She’s really sweet. And I know four…siblings, the Mukamis, and they’re alright.”

“Oh darling, I’m so glad to hear you’re making friends,” Mother sighed. Apparently this was a miracle- most of my old friends I’d known since I was three, and spent eight hours a day with. We’d forged bonds before I could open my fat mouth and ruin it.

I glanced at the time on my phone and wondered if I could get away with five minutes of conversation. “Mum, I have to go, the teachers here are really heavy on homework.”

It was hard to ignore the pang of guilt at the resulting drop in my mother’s voice when she responded, “Oh, okay love. Be safe- and call more often for God’s sake.”
“Of course,” I replied, already moving the phone away from my face.

“I love you darling.”

“You too.”

The silence returned (well, almost silence- the rabbits were still playing with their treat ball) and I let out a deep breath. The worst was yet to come though. I knew my ‘mental health issues’ seeing myself how I really am made my mother incredibly uncomfortable, and if I gave her a chance to make any discussion short and sweet she’d take it. My brother, on the other hand, was another kettle of fish.

Well.

It wasn’t the day to talk to him.

I shut my phone off and placed it on the table rather than shoving it down the side in a minor increase of responsibility.

I’d forgotten about ‘Brienne’ until I tried to get up too quickly. The tug on my skin sent a flash of pain, accompanied by a wave of nausea, through me, and I had to quickly sit back down on the bed. Carefully, I peeled off my top two jumpers before lifting the fabric of the third.

My middle had been carefully wrapped in pristine gauze, but I could see the pink tinges of blood, and a little further out, the yellow stain of plasma. Stepping over the rabbits, who’d quickly decided that my discarded jumper made a great spot to nap, I sorted through my drawers until I found a pair of scissors.

The other scars littering my torso seemed minuscule compared to the gigantic slash down my side. It looked like they’d stapled the skin together (probably while I was fucking passed out) but it was done decently. Still, getting them out would be a pain and a half.

I was probably better off leaving the gauze alone- my dressings were much worse than those done by the Mukamis. They’d had years (/how many?/) more practice than me.

As promised to my mother I got on with my homework, wanting to get it finished so I could spend Sunday just lying in bed (jiggling my legs to keep burning calories, of course). It was fairly difficult, especially since my language workbooks had been abandoned in search for more fitting vocabulary, like ‘sadistic bitchface’ and ‘pasty leech’.

I was so used to waking up at 9pm that, by 5 o’clock, I was completely exhausted. The lack of sleep, combined with having my blood drained and consuming exactly 14 calories (one cup of green tea with sorbitol=0 one cup of broth=10 one cup of lettuce=4 2 litres of water=0) left me feeling empty. The usual adrenaline that made me float through the streets had drained out of my circulatory system, and my heart thudded erratically in protest when I got up to take my medicine.

It’s poison, probably sugar pills to get you fat again.

They helped mute my head, that was all.

Half a banana and five special seeds to grow me into a strong girl later (54 calories) I was ready to shut down for the day. I made sure Gloom and Grimm were inside before locking the balcony door (in light of recent events it seemed like a superstition- lock your door and keep the undead boys out of your house) and crawling under the covers.
I patted the mattress lightly, prompting Grimm and Gloom to flop near my face as usual. They pressed their face curiously against mine, sniffing momentarily before giving me the customary neat lick and relaxing fully on the bed. Gloom was especially sweet, tucking her head under my chin, teeth chittering in delight when I lazily pet her.

The cramping in my side was painful, but not enough to prevent me sleeping.

The sky flashed red and purple, making me hold the heels of my palms to my eyes. Somewhere, I gigantic heart was beating, forcing gallons upon gallons of blood through arteries as wide as motorways with walls more gloopy gelatin than muscle. It scared me, so I ran.

I knew it was a dream- there was no pain when I stretched my leg fully, not fluttering heart to slow me down.

“Hey.”

What?

“Down here, dumbass~”

For the first time since the start of the dream I opened my eyes. The heart was still beating, sending pulses of dull noise through the dead forest and disturbing the leaf litter coating the ground. It was far away though, and when I went to look around the sky had settled into a dull red colour.

“Jesus, slow as ever. Lift up your top, bebeee.”

The last sentence was said in a slow, bubbling voice. Only doing as I was told because I knew it wasn’t real, I lifted up my jumper.

Brienne’s face was growing out of where ‘Brienne’ was in real life.

Her clever blue eyes swiveled in their sockets independently.

“Elita, heeeey~ I’m back!”

“No you’re not, you died. You’ll be buried soon.”

The face pouted, “Can’t you let me stay for a second? Please? It’s unfair, I don’t get to see my family but I get to see /you/.”

I sat down in the leaf litter, not questioning it when it turned into torn-up pages from newspapers and diaries and photo albums.

“Still quiet? You’ve gotten yourself into a right pickle,” Brienne- no, Brienne’s /face/, teased, “Soon you could even follow me.”

The promise wasn’t half bad. I could rest. I wouldn’t have to eat again.

“This is a dream, it doesn’t mean anything,” I said more to myself than Brienne, leaning back against the dead wood. I focused hard, trying to conjure the face away.

“Hmmm, but dreams always mean something, don’t they? Your mind is trying to figure things out, and it brought me here because you know as well as I that you’re too much of a pussy to change anything.”

I grit my teeth, “Fuck off. I moved here, that’s a change. Just because you let them poison you
doesn’t make me a pussy.”

Brienne looked up at me. I noticed her nose ring had been replaced with a skin-coloured stud, probably for the burial.

“I’m getting cremated,” she corrected me, sticking out her tongue. Her grin grew, “Hey, wouldn’t it be wicked if my Mum sent you me in a little baggy over the post?”

“I’d throw it in the dog poo bin.”

“Ruuuuude!”

“You’re more annoying than I remembered.”

“Well,” she said, “That’s because I’m not Brienne. Well, not the original. I’m your Brienne! The one that lives in /your/ head. You’re my…’mind mummy’.”

I snorted, and the shooting pain down my side felt too real to be a figment of my imagination. The face shut up for a moment.

“Elita…”

“Hm?”

“When you do it, off yourself I mean, do it finally. Throw yourself in front of a train. Jump off a building. Both at once, even.”

“Jump onto some train tracks from a building?”

“Perfecto~”

“Why?”

The eyes swiveled towards me knowingly, “You don’t think they’ll let you die, do you?”

“A-“

“Zuuuuu saaaaah,” Brienne sighed.

Another pang of pain shot me out of my dream, confused and oddly teary. Grimm had tried digging at the duvet tucked around my wounded side. Immediately I lifted the covers and inspected the stapled wound.

Two dark scars on either side of ‘Brienne’ lined up to look like eyes, and a larger, paler one perpendicular to ‘Brienne’ looked like a mouth.

When I got up I redid the bandages.

Tight enough to bruise.

Chapter End Notes

Spooky faces in spooky places. Sorry I’ve been slow. Life is strange. Selena Gomez’
'Fetish' video gave me Elita vibes and I'm not sure why. Hope everyone is safe and happy, and I'd love to hear what you think about this chapter : )
After I’d smothered ‘Brienne’ in enough layers of gauze to silence her, I got dressed and made the rabbits their breakfast. I was annoyed at my own anxiety—Brienne was dead, and ‘Brienne’ was a fucking cut. The dream meant nothing, just a tired brain trying to work through what had happened. Still, my hands shook as I put the shallow bowl on the floor. I took the Ativan I’d been prescribed (only for two weeks— the last thing I needed was a drug addiction) and waited for it to kick in. Medication always burned in my stomach, abusing the already distended lining. I refused to take medication with food. There was no point in poisoning myself.

It was a nice day, cold and bright. The park didn’t sound too busy, and I wanted to get out of the house. The idea of Azusa (and God knew who else) knowing where I lived made the anxiety return, despite the medicine. Quickly, I stuffed a tiny towel, some carrots, and a small water bottle into my already full bag.

It didn’t take long to wrangle the rabbits into their harnesses, and then into the messenger bag. Weighed down like a pack horse, I headed out of my flat and across the road to the quiet park.

Despite the weather, it was just as quiet as the times I came to pick nettles at 3am. Even from the short trek through the long grass my heart was thudding unevenly in my chest, creeping up my throat. It was a relief when I reached the opposite end of the field.

Gloom and Grimm were curiously looking out of the bag, their ears swivelling this way and that, listening out for dogs or foxes or the sound of a buzzard settling. They were indoor pets mainly, but that instinctive fear never left them.

Finally I settled down and hammered the peg into the ground with a tiny wooden mallet, tying the harnesses to it when I was done. This allowed the rabbits some free space to roam, but guaranteed they wouldn’t disappear into the long grass. My overturned bag made a good shelter for them.

I focused on the sketches and little samples I’d done in lesson, and couldn’t help but think how they differed from the easy, natural sketches Azusa did. He was probably an antique from the Victorian era, but it still nagged at the perfectionist in me. I’d been raised to be competitive, our whole family had, and not being the best was an uncomfortable feeling for me. It pushed me to work hard. The world didn’t care how much longer somebody had to prepare, or whatever family tragedy meant you spent more time in hospital waiting rooms than in practice, it cared about who had the prettiest feet and best lines.

When I started losing weight everyone congratulated me. It was easier to imagine a sad matchstick girl if the dancer wasn’t carrying lumps of fat around their thighs. They didn’t make china dolls or fairies with saggy stomachs. The adrenaline broke down every smear of fat into sugar. I was light, I was ethereal.

I remembered the twitch of pride when I walked through a group of Cours préparatoire children and heard the whispers. They wanted the hollows of my collar bones, the regular lines of my ribcage.

But they were scared.

After four months, and seven kilograms, the admiration turned into the morbid respect of somebody watching an animal limp into the woods after being hit by a car. My determination, my dedication was unquestionable. They were weak, and I was strong. I wore the over-sized shirts to
stretch class, high-waisted shorts and cold shoulder tops when we met up for green tea after class, but I still felt disgusting in them. My thinspo blog had so many followers it made up for the distance people put between themselves and me.

My finger traced over the anatomical diagram of muscle I’d laboured over. Even touching it felt dirty.

Muscle turned into fat in the long run.

I was completely out of it, following the tendons from the feet to the head of the skinned man in the book, when Gloom stomped in alarm. Both rabbits dashed into the bag, their eyes wide and ears flat against their head. Immediately I looked around. Had they spotted a dog? A fox?

“Elita-san…it’s nice to see you…”

Of course it was Azusa.

He’d managed to appear behind me in the split second it took me to scan the environment. He had a messenger bag, so full a human of such small stature would have difficulty carrying it. I scooted back, placing myself between him and the bag of bunnies.

“Why are you here?”

Frowning, he put his bag down on the ground and stepped closer, “You weren’t home…but I could…smell you here…”

I almost hissed, “Why were you at my flat?”

He seemed even more disappointed, like a puppy that happened to be a mass murderer after a night in the cold, “I wanted to see you…”

The urge to just stand up and slap him (which wouldn’t be worth the resulting ‘hurt me more daddy’) was overridden by my common sense. No matter how calm Azusa seemed, I didn’t want to test that. And, even though we were in public, he could rip my throat out before anyone could come to help me.

I sighed, then scooted across the picnic blanket, “Sorry, I am just…really tired. Come and sit with me, if you’d like.”

Immediately he brightened up and sat down next to me. Like his pockets, or the backpacks in Pokémon, his messenger bag was apparently a bottomless pit. First of all came his sketchbook, the cover coated in even more paint splatters and smudge marks than before, then a carton of juice (the kanji were unfamiliar to me) and a little box of pasta.

“You brought food?” I said, resigning my day of quiet being rudely disturbed.

“You never have any….”

“…A fair point.”

I leaned over to look at what he’d drawn in the book since our last meeting.

Unlike the usual sketches of his brothers, there were youthful faces I didn’t know. They didn’t look Japanese either, although it was hard to tell- Azusa had taken the time to scribble out their eyes with black oil pastel.
I motioned towards the unfamiliar faces, “Who are they?”

Pleased I was taking interest in his work, he tilted the sketchbook towards me. His scarred fingers gestured to the boy first, and then the two girls, “That’s Justin…and that’s Christina…and that girl with the bunches…is Melissa.”

The vague answer didn’t give me any of the answers I wanted, but from the dreamy tone in his voice I could tell that the children in the book were dead. It was the same way the nurses would talk about the girls in the pictures with the black frames.

*We asked about the wardrobe that had the rail removed and they told us it was morbid.*

*When Noella found a scrap of paper we silently passed it between us at dinner, reading the words of a dead girl that could belong to any one of us.*

“How long ago did you know them?”

He counted on his fingers, and once he reached the pinkie on his right hand he frowned.

“One hundred years…a bit more? Ruki is better at keeping track…”

I was surprised. *Why was he still in fucking school if he was that old?* The fact that he probably hadn’t had an education in his actual youth didn’t hit me until a while later, when he was talking more about the three children in the book.

“Before my brothers…they were the only ones…who spoke to me.”

Once again I looked over at his book. Azusa was drawing them again, leaving the space where the eyes should be completely empty. They weren’t smiling- it was more like a sneer, the way a threatened dog flashed its teeth.

The rabbits had shyly hopped out by now, and were sniffing at Azusa’s shoes cautiously. Grimm’s feet were completely stretched out, and his nose twitched. Deciding that he didn’t smell like a gigantic carnivore (what incredible judgement) Grimm hopped up closer. The soft pressure of Grimm’s nose against his calf alerted Azusa to the curious visitor.

He smiled, “Hello, bun-bun…”

He reached out. For the first time, I noticed how odd his fingers were- probably from being broken and re-set badly- and felt an odd swell of sympathy. It only took a press of the puncture wounds on my neck to remind me that, regardless of his shitty history, he was a snake.

A snake coiled beneath a foxglove.

Jealous of the attention, Gloom hopped closer, standing on her hind legs to get better access to the strange hand. Internally I was begging one of them to bite the shit out of him. The satisfaction would be worth any perverse comments.

Now Grimm had hopped onto his thigh and was sniffing around at the folds of his jumper. Apparently, it was such an optimal place that he lay down against his stomach.

“Traître,” I muttered. Apparently, there were TWO SNAKES AMONG US.

Still, Azusa seemed happy, running his crooked fingers gently over Grimm’s side, “What a good rabbit…”
“He’s friendlier than Gloom,” I said quietly, scooping up the loyal bun and holding her against my chest. Her thick fur felt like velvet.

I let my head roll down, resting against Gloom’s soft back. The exhaustion would draw back and return like the tide, leaving me with only the energy necessary to crawl somewhere out of the way to sleep. The quick thudding of her heart was concerningly similar to my own pulse.

There was a gentle tap on my shoulder and I flinched away. Azusa was properly cradling Grimm, making me panic. Was he going to snap his head off? Was this just a way to prove how he was stronger than me like it wasn’t blatantly obvious already.

“Elita-san…”

“Yes?”

“I like your rabbits…”

Edging away slightly, I smiled weakly, “Thanks. They are usually quite shy.”

Maybe he had some weird effect on animals. Gloom and Grimm had only been with myself and the vet for extended time, and usually hated contact beyond the initial twitchy-nose sniffing. It was hard to wrap my head around it- apparently all the shit I knew was as fabricated as the numbers in the grids at home.

I awkwardly reached into the bag and pulled out the carrot disks, passing a few to Azusa, “Here, give him some of them.”

Grimm was having a fantastic, traitorous time.

“Anyway,” I began, watching as Grimm nibbled greedily at the carrot disks, “Why were you here?”

Azusa shrugged, “Checking on you… the staples weren’t planned…”

“Do you usually use stitches when you stab people?”

He frowned, “I didn’t mean to….not that deep…”

Slowly Azusa let the rabbit down and shuffled around to face me, “Sorry…”

As much as I fucking hated to admit it, it seemed pretty genuine. I used one arm to hold onto Gloom, and scooped Grimm onto my lap with the other arm, feeling less antsy now both of the buns were with me.

“Just….ask? Please?”

I didn’t think ‘don’t come near me ever again’ would go over so well.

Azusa smiled so widely I thought I’d go blind, “That makes me happy…Elita-san.”

Accepting that I’d get stabbed sometime in the future, I sank backwards, still cradling the rabbits against my flat chest.

Then I smelled something I was more scared of than sadistic vampires.

“I made some of those…spice biscuits again…”
Swallowing the saliva that appeared out of nowhere to make me look like a weak bitch, I looked over at the clear plastic box. They were the same, warm brown as usual, but this time there was white icing. When I looked closely, I realised the icing was in the shape of a little bunny nose, and two cute little eyes.

It was sickening.

“Thank you, Azusa-kun.”

I made no attempt to reach for them, hoping my acknowledgement would be enough to keep them away from me.

No luck there. His hand, delicately holding onto the edge of the biscuit, approached. My arms full of rabbits, I could hardly smack it out of his hands. Reluctantly my lips peeled back and my teeth parted. The spice on my tongue instantly made my mouth flood with saliva.

It wasn’t the worst thing in the world until Azusa decided that I didn’t have *enough* biscuit, and pushed the rest of it into my mouth. Chewing awkwardly to avoid choking to death, I could see the arrow on the scale racing ahead.

43kg

**50kg**

There were supplies at home sure, but they didn’t do nearly as much good if they weren’t taken immediately.

“Azusa-kun, I have to go home, but I’ll take the food.”

“Why…”

“Because…” I looked down at the rabbits in my arms, “The rabbits don’t feel very safe. There are dogs and cats that come through here.”

He took a moment to deliberate, and sniffed the air.

“There are cats…Let me help you…”

He put his own stuff apart from the food in his own bag, and then scooped that and my bag up. Struggling to keep us as he walked quickly through the grass, I noticed how dark it was. It wasn’t as noticeable in the shade, but the sun was low in the sky, and the air had a sure chill.

Gloom and Grimm were snuggled up close to me, their eyes wide and alert. No doubt they (and probably Azusa) could smell whatever was stalking through the grass. I felt oddly vulnerable, being the only one not in the know.

My legs ached so much that, when we arrived at the door to the flat, I just tiredly waved Azusa in rather than coming up with an excuse to keep him out. It wasn’t like I could really stop him anyway. I shut the door and undid the harnesses, letting Grimm and Gloom be free once more. Grateful, they bounced around the floor, re-marking the chair and table legs and investigating the tunnels and hides scattered around the floor.

Watching them, Azusa slid the box of biscuits, and then the box of cold pasta across the table to me. It looked so *delicious healthy filling* disgusting, oozing with fat. The green grains of ‘pesto’ were really larvae that would eat my insides if I was stupid enough to consume them.
“I need to go… but bring the boxes tomorrow…” Azusa said simply, reaching out to pat my head. The gesture was so awkward it reminded me of when dogs tried to do it, imitating their owners.

“Yeah. I’ll see you, Azusa-kun.”

Obviously satisfied with ruining my day alone, he left without much complaint. It was hard to wait to slide the pasta and the vast majority of the biscuits into the toilet, but he had me even more paranoid than before. If he could smell a cat stalking through a park, then he could probably hear the rush of water travelling down the pipes.

I completed my bedtime rituals, and not feeling as awful as I usually did after an encounter with Azusa (probably because he didn’t stab me) I went to bed.

I dreamt again.

The feel of soft carpet between my toes was familiar, but the silence on the ward was not. Usually there was always a commotion- girls on the phone with their family, talking, the staff cooking meals or searching rooms for the remnants of them, but this time there was nothing. I hadn’t been there for a while, but that walk was burned to my brain for all eternity. Slowly, I headed down the hallway and pushed open the door to my old room at the clinic.

The wardrobe door (rail still present) was open, and Brienne, the girl, was sat on my bed, toying with a length of nylon cord. She grinned when she saw me, dropping the cord to open up her arms.

“Elita! You’re here— I thought you were going to be late!”

“What?” I walked over to the other bed and sat down, watching as Brienne’s scratched fingers (teeth marks Bher own teeth marksB) continued to work the rope.

“Spent so long with lover-boy you almost forgot me~”

I sighed, “He assaulted me. What are you doing with that?”

She rolled her eyes again, “Showing you something! Now, watch closely, okay? We don’t have time to waste.”

The light in the room was a dark pink, but I could see what she was doing perfectly clearly. Her hands manipulated the rope into a knot. She held up the finished product, poking her face through the hole and sticking her tongue out.

“Ta-dah! Good, right? I never got a chance to use this in real life.”

“That’s because you couldn’t stop stuffing your face.’

The wind pulled the white netted curtains against the windows before relaxing them. Far off, I could hear the thudding of a gigantic heart in the sky.

She put the rope down, exasperated, “So fucking rude to me Elita! I’m doing you a favour.”

“You’re stopping me from sleeping, that’s not a favour.”

Gesturing with the rope, Brienne leaned towards me. “I’m telling you, he’s going to rape you, and then he’s going to kill you, and the only way to prevent that is by doing it first.”

I laid down on the bed. It smelled like hospitals and lavender, “…I need to sort stuff out first.”
Brienne snorted, “Like what? You have no friends, your whole family wishes you were dead, and, let’s be real, it’s not like you’re going anywhere.”

She crept closer, her eyes light with mirth, “Come on. You’re a fucking whale. It’s lonely without you.”

When I woke up I walked over to the toilet and vomited until I saw stars.

Chapter End Notes

Traître= ‘traitor’ in French

So, results day is on the 17th, and as there is a very real chance I will fucking kill myself lmao I hope you enjoy this chapter. It took me a long time, that's why the ending isn't the best. Please comment and let me know if it was okay (and cheer me up). Tell me if it's macabre- I really want that to come across in my work and I'm not sure if it is. I hope everyone that has results coming out soon is happy with them.
Stomach still cramping. I fetched my phone and shakily informed the academy that I wouldn’t be attending that night. Did it feel shitty to miss school? Absolutely. Did I want to go to school just to pass out in the hallway? No. My hands were still shaking violently as I flushed the toilet and then doused the bowl in bleach. The irregular thudding of my heart in my ears was a sure sign that I wouldn’t be able to handle the walk to the academy, let alone the demanding classes. And on top of that, dealing with Azusa was exhausting on the best of days (when there was a smaller number on the scale than the day before) let alone after a start like this. The palpitations made it so hard to breathe I had to sit down, back against the grubby kitchen counter. Gloom and Grimm worried around me, rubbing their chins against my shaking shins before scrabbling onto my fatty stomach.

I grabbed hard at the fatty side of my stomach, twisting the flesh as hard as I could. My teeth were bared in a grimace like a disgusted dog.
“Shut up, shut the fuck up.”
Brienne was fucking dead. She was a figment of my imagination. Once the whole business with her parents was over with, and the physical remains of my friend were sealed in a casket, it was sure to get better.

Glancing accusingly at the segmented box on the counter, I rifled through the boxes and pulled out the thick wads of paper within. Sure enough, right next to ‘bleeding from the eyes’ and ‘intestinal cramps’ was ‘vivid, frequent dreams’. After flushing an entire bottle of meds down the toilet, I satisfied that Brienne would leave me alone now her chemical assistants were working their way down the pipes.

It seemed luxurious just to crawl back into bed and cocoon myself in my duvet again. There would be no talking, no hiding from weird boys (vampires). I could rest (dreamlessly, hopefully) and take a day to think out what I had to do. Brienne, as much as I resented her, was right. If Azusa’s apparent gentle nature was just a ruse, then I wouldn’t be escaping alive. Either I killed myself, I went back to Paris, or he got to me first, and the idea of returning home looking the way I did made me cringe.

So…

“Duval-san?”

The voice from behind the door made me jump feet. It was a familiar voice, although I’d only seen Mr. Hamada once to collect my key. True to form, most of our communication happened through doors. Immediately I got up, pulling on a hoodie as I walked to the door and undid the lock.

“Hamada-sama? Good evening. Is there something wrong?”

A nightmareish vision of the medication clogging up the pipes flashed through my mind until I got a grip on myself. They dissolved in water, there was no way they’d cause a clog in the pipes.

He held out a large package. The return address made my throat seize.

“I got this parcel for you this morning, but I didn’t want to wake you,” my landlord explained,
smiling kindly.
I nodded, and took the package from him.

“Thank you.”

“Duval-san…are you alright?”

I cleared my throat, “Yes, sorry, I’m just feeling a bit ill. Thank you, Hamada-sama.”

“Good evening, Duval-san.”

As soon as I heard his footsteps disappear down the hall I closed the door and locked it. The weight of the parcel made my arms tremble.

It was the parcel from Brienne’s parents.

I suddenly regretted flushing my medication down the toilet.

Carefully, I stripped off the packaging, revealing the locked box inside. Gloom and Grimm were already rummaging through the packaging, poking the paper aside with their noses, and after a more thorough search by me I concluded that there was no key.

*Was this Brienne’s final piss-take? Sending me a box that I couldn’t possibly open?*

My head felt like the boiler in the Overlook Hotel. Even minimal effort made it ache in protest, and I closed my eyes tight.

Four counts in.

Four counts out.

Really, I needed *food some cold water, and a piece of celery with some painkillers* but I knew I couldn’t stop, not once I started. I had sporadic self control, and letting it slip could mean never getting it back.

While I pondered whether the burning pain of taking medication without food was worth the trade-off, the rabbits bounded off of the bed and towards the door.

There was another knock at the door, and this time I tugged my legs closer to my stomach and pulled the duvet up to my legs. I knew that knock.

“Elita-san?”

Due to my distraction, I had forgotten to lock the door after Mr. Hamada had left, not that it made any difference when it came to Azusa. He came in, a paper bag in hand, hair slightly more dishevelled than usual.

His nose wrinkled, “Were you ill?”

“Yeah, I must have a bug or something.”

Sitting down gingerly at the end of the bed, Azusa put the little paper bag on top of my shins. Carefully, like a police officer diffusing a bomb, I opened the bag little by little until the pastry inside was revealed. The smell was familiar and made my stomach absolutely ache.

“Croissants are French…. I thought you’d…like one.”
“Could you do me a…nice thing?” The word had escaped me, but I was sure Azusa would get the gist.

I motioned at the box, “I can’t open it. Can you open it for me?”

Running his hands over the wood of the box, he seemed to sniff at it. Maybe he could still smell Brienne (maybe it would be a way to anchor her to my house maybe she’d bleed into the walls and slip down the drains).

“It’s old…” Azusa said simply, turning the heavy box in his hands like it weighed nothing, “I’ll break the locks…”

His crooked fingers, scarred completely across the knuckles, momentarily grazed across the edge of the mechanism before pausing. His usually sleepy face seemed more focused than usual.

“I’ll open it…for half…of the croissant.”

It seemed like an odd request, but I complied, breaking the still-warm pastry apart with my hands and holding the larger part out for Azusa. He shook his head.

“No…you must eat it… or the box stays closed…”

*Sneaky little shit.*

I recoiled, dropping the pasty on the plastic bag. My hands felt greasy and disgusting from just holding it.

Still…

The sooner the box was opened, the sooner I could get rid of it, and the sooner I could stop dreaming.

Shakily, I stood, padding over to the sink and pouring myself a gigantic glass of water. Gloom and Grimm had already settled by Azusa, rubbing their chins over the new and interesting object. I decided to keep the box, cut a little opening in it, and use it as a rabbit hide. I doubted whatever dregs of Brienne’s soul were sticking to the box would be strong enough to affect a healthy mind, centred only on hay and greens.

It took me twenty minutes to eat half a pasty.

By the end my stomach felt like a balloon. My stomach bulged obscenely, *disgustingly* out over the waistband of my sleeping shorts. I scowled at Azusa with crumb-covered lips.

“Your turn.”

Apparently satisfied, he gripped at either half of the box and pulled. The lock held for a moment before coming apart with a sharp crack, and the smell of dying flowers increased tenfold. I had to pull up the bottom of my shirt to cover my nose, or there’d be another trip to the bathroom, far more rushed this time.

Cringing all the while, I leant over to look in the box. It was jam-packed with what looked like abandoned crafting materials. There were empty glue sticks and ribbon and felt-tips with the caps left off. Once all the materials had been lifted from the box and onto the bed (*burn the sheets* I picked up the last item in the box.

This notebook was in far better condition than the tatty, well-loved items that filled out the rest of
Did I even want to read it?

Gingerly, I opened the first page. Pressed petals fell onto the bed, followed by a dead spider.

“How long did she keep it like this?” I murmured to myself.

Azusa shifted closer on the bed, knocking some old papers onto the floor which neither of us paid attention to.

The pictures were peeling off of the pages, but it was glaringly obvious what it was.

I thought people had stopped making those sickly parodies of bullet journals, filled with pictures of girls we could never be and the nutritional information of the poison that stopped us even coming close. The numbers were carefully marked in orange gel pen, recording every sin.

Flipping through the book (all of the pages were the same, apart from where the numbers were huge and scratched into the paper in black ink) I looked for whatever she wanted to show me.

“What’s wrong?” Azusa asked, snapping me out of focus.

Running my hand gently over one of the ‘rules’ pages to keep her small and wanted, I frowned, “This is…what I expected? What did she want me to see?”

He took the book from my hands, turning the pages until only the last few dozen remained.

“There’s glue…” Azusa motioned, tapping one of the pages with his finger. It creased oddly, like there was nothing underneath it to provide support.

“Poke through it,” I urged. The ridiculous idea that Brienne had hidden a mousetrap under there to deter potential snoopers seemed far more credible considering all the ridiculous shit that had happened.

He obliged, pressing down on the paper until it tore messily. The dead flower smell was overpowering.

Cautiously reaching into the compartment, I braced myself for a manner of awful things. Brienne always had a macabre sense of humour (the amount of times she got into trouble for just dropping a pencil and yelling ‘I’m going to kill myself’ was immeasurable). She always said I needed to lighten up, to ‘have a little fun’.

She still says it.

No. I ground my teeth together. That wasn’t Brienne, that was my mind being ill and tired and constructing a version of her to help me grieve.

My other hand made its way to my side, gripping the flesh there tight. The dull pain steeled me.

One by one I picked out the petals, laying them in long straight rows like frail soldiers. Soon, Azusa’s cold hands joined mine, and five roses worth of petals were carefully arranged on the grimy sheets.

‘For emergencies :P’

A tiny bag of pills was glued to the back of the book. I wrinkled my nose- did Brienne really send me some laxatives as her goodbye token?
At least, I thought they were.

“She was strange…wasn’t she…” Azusa murmured, gathering the petals up in his hands and putting them back into the hidden compartment.

I nodded. It was strange.

When she first came to the unit she filled the whole house with the smell of roses. She was dropped off in a dusty pink car, and she had a wheat-bag in the shape of a heart that was confiscated in case she tried to beat herself over the head with it.

We watched from ajar doors and the creaky staircases, whispering among ourselves.

Her hair was thicker than ours, her skin was clearer, but she was like us. Brienne had the same dead eyes as me, and the same brittle nails concealed with gloopy coats of nail polish (only cut when under strict supervision) as Alavda.

One night when the wind shrieked through the house I awoke to Brienne, sweat pooled in her bellybutton, doing sit ups. Her feet were jammed under the bedframe, carving grooves into her toes.

She didn’t question when I got up and sat down, holding her feet down, and I didn’t question when she sat next to me at breakfast and distracted the nurse while I slipped spoonful’s of cereal into my pockets.

“Elita-san…”

Jamming the fallen papers in the lock so I could open the box again, I looked up at Azusa. The circles under his eyes seemed darker than before, his skin much sallower. Could vampires get tired after all?

Scooting a little closer, Azusa, reached out slowly, like he was coaxing a scared animal out from under the sofa.

“Can I feed…”

I was about to come up with some reason (could vampires catch HIV?) when he spoke again.

“I know you like… when I ask before…”

“Before you bite me?”

He nodded, smiling, “Yeah…Can I?”

I had two options.

One- go along with it and protect myself from being slammed against a fucking wall again.

Two- say no, and be bitten anyway, but be brutalised in the process.

Swallowing hard, I gripped the bedsheets in an attempt to stop my hands shaking.

“You can.”

Azusa practically beamed.
“I’m glad…Elita-san…”

The bed shifted. He put a pillow up against the wall and gently pushed me back, crawling between my legs. It was a bit too… intimate for me, but again, I wasn’t in the position to say anything. His cold hand made my skin come up in goose bumps as he tilted my head back, exposing my neck.

“It’ll hurt you…hurt me too…”

There was a moment of resistance as my paper-thin skin stood strong before, with a sickening ‘pop’, his teeth sank into my flesh. The pain made me cringe under him, worming my arms around his middle to stop him moving so much. Fading into a dull ache, the pain had the same effect as ten thousand volts of electricity fizzled through my nerves. My nails dug into the back of his neck and I groaned.

Between loud, sloppy gulps, Azusa mumbled into my skin, “Thank you… I’ll make it good… for you…”

Disturbingly, the dull ache turned into something…deeper. It all seemed surreal, the cool light reflecting off the water dish, projecting rippling patterns onto the ceiling, the cold body above me slowly but surely warming up.

His cool hand then slipped down my side, gripping at ‘Brienne’.

“Azusa,” I whined pitifully, my eyes welling up, “It hurts…”

I didn’t know whether that was a good or bad thing.

Languidly, Azusa lapped at my neck with his cool tongue before shuffling down the bed. He pulled my baggy top up, running his hands over the swarms of scars on my thighs.

“Just like me…”

He bit down in the valley left by my hipbone, and I yelped, the ensuing flinching made his fangs tear into me even more. My hands went to his head, knocking his dumb fucking beret off before gripping at his hair.

As his hands became hotter and hotter, my head felt lighter and lighter. The aching pain was replaced with a numbness that completely flooded my mind. The rippling reflection on the ceiling repeated themselves across the ceiling, and then down the cupboards, and then my vision was filled with the same dancing pattern. In a desperate attempt to remain conscious (that was admittedly short sighted) I thumped the back of my head against the wall.

Stars joined the rippling patterns.

“Azusa, stop, I feel weird,” I slurred, tugging at his hair weakly.

Surprisingly, he listened.

The bed shifted again, and I was laid back down properly by warm, almost human temperature skin.

“Eat… you need sugar…”

I opened my mouth, and a small chunk of croissant was pushed past my lips and into my mouth. I chewed thirty-three times (a holy number to stop the Bnastiness contaminating meB) and
swallowed. Before I could even try to calculate how many calories I lost in the form of blood, and how much would be replaced by the croissant, another piece of the pastry was pushed into my mouth.

The pieces were chewed and swallowed in conveyor-belt like fashion, and soon the ripples returned to their original place. Azusa was laid out next to me, leaning on one elbow. We stayed like that until the moon had disappeared from the view of the window and the rabbits had returned to their bed.

Brienne’s box lay abandoned on the floor, the sickly scent of roses changing the tiny studio flat into the room in the unit.

I bit down hard on my lip, trying to bring myself back to the present. It was easy to lose time.

“Azusa?”

“Hm?”

His head, which was nuzzled into the crook of my neck, shifted so that I could see his sad eyes peering at me from the corner of my vision.

“…Nothing.”

I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the box on the floor.

*He’s going to kill you, you know.*

I didn’t want to listen to Brienne. I was so tired.

“Azusa, could you tell me a story?”

His mouth shifted against my skin into a smile.

“Of course…Elita-san.”

So I listened to Azusa, and tried to ignore the voice coming from the wooden box on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

I got into my uni of choice! I hope all of you have a lovely day and enjoy the chapter. Tell me if you liked it. I want to come up with a cute lil name for my readers-comment below if you have any ideas.
The pure, complete black of a dreamless sleep slowly lightened into a dark grey. Blearily, I looked around, my eyes taking a moment to adjust to the light in the room. The spindly black thing was a chair, the two dark blobs were Gloom and Grimm…Obviously, I’d fallen asleep. If the dusty pink sky was anything to go by, then I was asleep for hours. Immediately I wracked my brain, trying to remember if I dreamed.

Nope.

There was Azusa talking about his childhood, and then nothing. My mouth curved into a triumphant grin- I knew it was the medication.

It was stuffy and oddly warm (keep the air conditioning on, wear the bare minimum, keep burning calories). I could still hear the mechanical whir of the fan, so there wasn’t a power outage, and the warmth was radiating from behind me...

Instantly, I felt like vomiting.

The bed, while large enough to accommodate my ballooning fat, made sleeping with somebody else uncomfortably intimate. The pressure on my stomach, which I’d assumed to be a tangle of sheets, increased, and I was pulled back against Azusa’s front. His leg was pushed between mine, and for a moment all I could feel was the soft fabric of his trousers between my thighs. It was the idea of him feeling every roll and dimple in my back that made me shudder rather than the leg between mine. If he wanted to rape me he’d have done it by now.

So I didn’t move.

Apart from the unconscious ‘cuddling’ (as much as I resented to admit that was what it was) he was completely silent. His chest rose and fell at such a small rate I thought he’d died in his sleep, and from the quiet it seemed like his sleep was as dreamless as my own.

My father used to tell me that nightmares stemmed from social animals sleeping alone. It was the mind’s way of dealing with the possibility of an ambush when at its most vulnerable. Although he was a solicitor, he always fancied himself as a psychologist. That was how he squeezed his clients dry I suppose, convincing them that the fancy lunches and chauffeured cars were a necessity.

The last time I’d slept in the same bed as someone was the last time I was allowed on a family holiday.

I practically floated. I weighed 46.5 kilograms, and caused just enough concern to ensure I didn’t get my own room. My single bed was at one end of the room, and Adaani and Amorelle shared the double bed at the other. It was hard to hide anything from two eleven-year olds, let alone a clogged toilet from over-ambitious attempts at appearing alright.

These times were special. I attended a different dance program from the twins, so I was sure it was an excuse when the two usually boisterous girls dragged me to their bed (they were getting strong /I was wasting away) with the weak excuse that the summer thunder was scaring them.

Sandwiching me, Adaani curled up in front of me, her bruised leg regularly kicking at my shins,
and Armorelle starfished behind me. It was warm, and the occasional flashes of white light from the summer storm made it feel even more secure.

Furrowing my brow, I tried hard to remember if I had any dreams.

Large portions of my childhood, the portions that weren’t consumed with thoughts of who had the best turn out or who could leap the highest (who could purge and brush their teeth in the ten minute break between classes) were black. Flashes of memory illuminated them like stars in the sky-

Jean walking me home from class/Mother making crepes on my birthday/Father coming home with a little trinket for me after one of his long business trips

-but their light was weak. The star was dead, the light reaching my tired eyes a mere memory. I couldn’t go back to those times even if I wanted to, the times when I was the favourite daughter (not a difficult choice when there was only one).

What happened in the dark came into the light.

Azusa shifted behind me, his cool breath teasing a wisp of my hair. Instinctively I froze, thinking that my movement had disturbed him. It was like a rabbit dozing off, curled up with a fox. I wasn’t as safe as I made myself believe in the pale light of sunrise.

Reaching blindly for my phone, I sent a tin box containing my earrings clattering onto the floor. Azusa seemed to start awake before the box even hit the ground, resting his weight on his left arm. The way he looked around in absolute terror frightened me in a different way than when his fangs pressed into my neck.

“Azusa?”

His sleepy eyes slowly cleared. Without his beret, his hair was wilder than ever.

“Elita-san…”

I swallowed, “Sorry about the noise. I hit my box?”

The little tin box lay next to the heavy oak one, looking like a chick following its mother. The oak box sent a wave of nausea rolling through me.

Peering over the side, the odd expression on his face seemed to clear.

“I’m not good with…loud noises…”

Nodding, I managed to disentangle myself from him. Knowing that bending down would only result in a palpitation (I was just waiting for one to cross into heart attack territory) I crouched to pick up the box and the rabbit’s water bowl. They were both dozing in their nest, ears pricking lazily when I began to move around.

“Loud noises are…. Uh, they make you jump?”

Japanese was hard enough when I had a green tea in me, let alone having just woken up. He nodded, getting up from the bed as well and picking his beret up (my phone was hiding underneath it) stretching his arms as he did so. My eyes followed his body.

Azusa was more than thin. His collar bones stood out of his skin by a good half inch, and the
thinness of his wrists made his normal hands appear gigantic in comparison. With every movement, the bones in his hand shifted, casting shadows across his skin. My eyes were completely fixated on it - I couldn’t drag them away if I tried to.

“Yes…”

After running his fingers through his messy hair (it didn’t make much difference) he pulled his hat back on.

Frowning, Azusa looked across at the fridge, “I wanted to wake up….before you.”

“It’s no worry? I wasn’t awake for long before you.”

Azusa got up off the bed, which hardly shifted from the loss of weight, and walked over to the fridge.

_Busted._

All there was was one celery stalk (6 calories) and some orange juice bought as a prop (casually sip it during video calls, assure the family that I was eating well, and then run off the difference later).

“There’s nothing here…”

I stood up too quickly, the world teetering in my vision, as I crossed the room and closed the fridge door. I put myself between it and Azusa, sliding my back against it.

“It’s, uh, it’s been a long time since I shopped! Everything in the fridge is gone.”

He wrinkled his nose, “You don’t taste like it…. You’re lying.”

Azusa probably didn’t appreciate the complete lie, and suddenly my heart was thudding so quickly I could feel the movement in my stomach. My knees weakened slightly, but I managed to grip onto the counter before crumpling to the floor.

_The fox and the rabbit. Would he cache me away in some derelict building for when the pickings weren’t as good?_

Speaking to himself, Azusa’s eyes unfocused for a moment, giving me time to stumble out by my bed, where I had a little more room to manoeuvre.

“I’ll have to…talk to Ruki…”

Great. The guy that blatantly disliked me, and who was also a nasty vampire.

“Azusa, why don’t we go and get some food? At the supermarket?”

He snapped back into reality.

Much to my relief (and suspicion) he shook his head, “No… I have to go… I’ll see you at lunch.”

I nodded, opening the door for him as he tugged his shoes on.

“I’ll see you… Elita-san…”

Waving weakly, I waited until he disappeared from my view before closing the door quietly behind me and smiled. At least I wouldn’t have to make up an excuse as to why I couldn’t possibly handle
half a punnet of grapes or something.

The sleeping schedule I’d taken weeks to build was ruined though. It was 7am, and according to the little note pinned to my wall I was supposed to be asleep, ready for the next school night, by then. I did feel tired, but if I went back to sleep I was doomed to sleep through my alarm and miss another day of school.

Settling back into bed, I pulled my computer onto my lap and checked my school email.

*Hello Elita-san!*

*I hope you’re feeling well. You weren’t in history, so I was worried.*

*I’ll get into trouble with the brothers if I write much more.*

*The homework sheet is attached to the email. I sent a picture of my notes too (´ ▽ `)/*

*See you tomorrow,*

*Yui*

I quickly tapped out a reply. It was a pretty lame excuse, but it was all I could think of that early in the morning.

*Hi Yui.*

*Sorry about not coming to lass. I didn’t feel very well. The sleep was good for me, and I’ll e seeing you tomorrow (today?).*

*Best wishes,*

*Elita*

Usually I was so exhausted after a night at school that it was easy to ignore the distant yells of people tumbling out of bars, but now I was awake it was all my mind had to fixate on. They seemed to be having a good time, singing drinking songs. Their voices quickly faded into silence as they headed into the tube stations to get home for a precious hour of sleep before waking up and repeating.

*Rinse and repeat.*

There wasn’t much I could say about Azusa that was nice (thin, quiet, liked the rabbits) but he kept the days different. Looking back my days at the hospital blended into one, and that lack of distinction bled into my days at dance school.

The nights were always the same though.

I looked down at Brienne’s box on the floor.

As much as I wanted to torture myself and pick through it, maybe read some of the scribbles in the journal, I had to talk to the living eventually.

Jean, surprise surprise, was online. It was only 10pm, so I couldn’t say much, seeing as I’d become completely nocturnal.
In the few seconds I had before Jean picked up I made myself presentable- I brushed through my thinning hair with my fingers, and adjusted my sleeping shirt so that the most defined points of my collar bones were hidden. Thinking the better of it all together, I hastily tugged the duvet around me like a poncho before Jean’s face popped up on the screen.

The sound was distorted, but it was nice to hear a familiar voice.

“Heeey Smell-ita. How’s it going?”

“Hi Jean. What are you doing up this late? Isn’t it bedtime?”

He adjusted the webcam to flash me a pile of papers. Just glancing at them made my head hurt.

“I got going on my research, thought it would be dumb to stop while I was in the mood for it.” He tilted his head, “Aren’t you supposed to be in school?”

I had plenty of practice lying, “Just came home and thought I’d give you a call. It’s been a while.”

Sobering, Jean nodded, “Did you hear…?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

I respected Jean in a different way from my parents because he knew when to pry and when to just leave it alone.

His hand ran through his hair, and I found myself mirroring the action.

“If you’re sure. I’m here to talk if you need to though. I… I know how Mum can be-”

“Completely invasive?”

Jean raised an eyebrow and took a sip from a mug (probably filled with coffee given the hour of night) “It’s just her way of showing she cares and you know it.”

That shut me up.

“Anyway,” I made a show at looking at the clock, “I better get started with my homework. It’s a lot more difficult here.”

“Have you even had homework before?” He teased.

It was a running joke between us- I’d always been to dance schools, where they avoided giving us anymore than the bare minimum of assignments so we could focus on dance. A lot of my general knowledge I knew came from my short conversations with Jean, who had more fun telling us about his school day than actually experiencing it.

I stuck my tongue out, “I think the mould has made your memory bad, Jean.”

Seeing me glance at the clock again, Jean waved his hand in front of his face, “Don’t let me keep you. I’ll tell Mum you’re still alive.”

“She spoke to me yesterday!” I said, exasperated. I didn’t blame her, I wouldn’t trust anything that
came out of my lying mouth either.

Jean rolled his eyes, “Just accept it, Elita, this is the price you pay for moving out early.”

“Thanks for the advice.”

I made to end the call, making Jean almost leap out of his seat.

“Wait!”

“What?!”

His trademark ‘haha I got you with a bad joke’ smirk made an appearance, “You haven’t introduced me to the rabbits.”

“You shocked me for that?”

“Heh, yeah.”

It was the only acceptable reason- Jean knew I loved the rabbits, and would show them off at any opportunity. Gently, I scooped Gloom and Grimm off of the floor and onto my lap. They regarded Jean with curiosity before deciding that chewing on the hem of my pyjamas was far more entertaining.

He motioned to Gloom, “That’s the girl, right? She looks refined.”

Nodding, I gave her a quick scratch on the head, making her teeth chitter in delight.

“Grimm is a little younger,” I explained, “Only by a week or two.”

“But long enough to throw them separate birthday parties?”

I grinned sheepishly, “You know me too well.”

The rabbits squirmed on my lap.

“I’ll let you go and learn now,” Jean said, reaching for his mouse, “Speak soon.”

“Love you Jean.”

“You too, Smellita.”

The screen flashed white for a moment, asking about the quality of the call.

After gently pushing the rabbits off of my lap, I slipped the computer onto the floor and pulled the covers back over me. It was…strange. I was never good with conversation (I only knew how to lie) but I felt exhausted. Undoubtedly there’d be work from the lost day to catch up on, but my body worked independently, tugging the duvet back over me.

The rabbits moved around me, scrabbling at the covers and then at my legs.

I didn’t move until one of their claws caught against the staples holding Brienne together.

“Silly buns,” I muttered, lifting them back onto the floor. Disgruntled, they flicked their feet at me as they bounced away. There was still plenty of food in their bowl, I was okay for another sleep.

‘Sometimes I feel I’ve got to-
run away-

The music pounded in my head. The club was completely dark apart from the pulsing mass of flesh on the high ceiling. With each contraction a dull, pink light flashed through it and then faded, leaving only a split second of complete darkness before the next flash. The air tasted of blood and perfume.

I’d never been to a club before, there wasn’t any opportunity when classes finished at 9pm and began again at 6am, but I’d seen enough television to know one when I saw one. Every dancer around me had their back to me; not a single face was visible in the sea of heads. Routinely someone’s hair would end up in my gaping mouth.

A path through the crowd naturally formed. Like a shark swimming through a bait ball, the path closed behind me. The music got quieter as I headed to the side of the room. Behind what seemed like a seating area (girls in hospital gowns sipping mineral waters/crushing purple pills).

Stood alone in the red wall was a single black door. The symbol on it swam before my eyes, but I knew it lead to the toilets.

I’d only just noticed the metallic taste of blood fade into the musty smell of dried flowers.

“Please,” I whispered to myself, “Please no.”

The door was hot when I pushed it open.

Although the music had faded into a quiet hum, the walls still shook in time with the pulsing mass in the main room. The walls were covered in red and black and white tiles in a pattern that made my eyes swim. Now the stench of roses was sickeningly strong.

There was no door to the bathroom.

Perched casually on the bathroom counter, Brienne’s head snapped up as soon as I stepped foot into the room. Her grin was mischievous, cunning, like everything had worked out just the way she wanted.

“You’ve come to visit me already? D’aww, you’re so sweet!”

My knees collapsed beneath me.

“Oh God why.”

Brienne tilted her head and lifted one spindly arm, pointing to the bathroom stalls. Her veins stood out of her skin like trails of black wool.

“Go there if you’re feeling sick- that’s what they’re there for~”

Unable to stand again, I dragged myself across the tiled floor, ignoring Brienne on the counter. The stalls (wine red, like everything else) felt an eternity away.

Finally I reached the door. Using my full weight (God I was tired) I pushed it open.

When I awoke for the second time that day, the sky was a dull mauve, and the box was wide open.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry about how long this one took guys. I went on holiday and then started uni, so it's been a bit of a chaotic time, but hopefully updates will be more regular from now on. I hope all you lil gingerbread pals are okay. Thank you for your continued support, and tell me what you think in the comments below.
Chapter Notes

This chapter contains very, very explicit descriptions of self harm. If this will trigger you, please do not read this chapter. I will write a summary of this chapter before the next one I post. Stay safe and read responsibly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So the box was open when you woke up?”

Yui was trying her best not to look completely weirded out, but the slight furrowing of the eyebrows spoke volumes.
“\text{I know it sounds strange,}” I began, desperately trying to make the situation seem less… well, not as absurd as it really was, “\text{But the box should have been closed.”}

She politely fiddled with her hands as she tried to come up with something to say. No doubt I sounded completely insane- even with the correct vocabulary (oddly enough, ‘abomination sent from God to punish me’ was not in the ‘Easy learning: French to Japanese’ dictionary) it sounded like an article on the front page of a trashy magazine.
I looked the ‘completely losing my mind’ part too. A clump of hair came away in my hands as I pulled my hair into a ponytail that morning, and I wasn’t entirely sure the bald patch wasn’t visible. Still, it gave me a chance to preen in the cold light of the bathroom. No longer obscured by bubbling lumps of 	ext{fat}, my jaw was more angular than before. It was far from perfect, but I clung onto the slight change.

The tips whispered between stick girls on nasty forums, the pounding headaches, the clear skin turned spotty- it had to be for something.

\textit{Moths battering against a paper lampshade.}

“Elita-san?”

Tilting her head to get a proper look at my face, Yui was looking up at me. Quickly, I tried to look present, smiling

\textit{back right molar wobbling in its socket from dry mouth}

the best I could.

In a poor imitation of the carefree characters in books, I scratched the back of my neck.

“Sorry, I’m just tired. Tachibana-sensei gives us a lot of work. Is it okay for you?”

At least I had solace at home. My friend, who looked almost as weak as me, had to spend her whole life being hounded by some dirty fucking perverts. It made my blood boil.

She shrugged, “I’ll get through it.”

Her resolve steeled, and she tightly held the cross around her neck in her hand.
“I have to get through it. I need to… my father, my family, I have to know how I ended up there in
the first place.”

Somehow, despite the circumstances, I knew that she would. Yui had survived so far, and from the
stories she told me (always looking over her shoulder or up into the tree branches) that was no
mean feat.

It was impossible not to look up to her. She was angelic.

The lessons passed by in a confusing blur. Luckily Yui was there to help translate the bits of the
lectures I didn’t understand (the workbooks were gathering dust in the corner of my room) but the
end of the day couldn’t come quick enough.

There were fourteen missed calls on my phone when I got out of class. A wave of panic rushed
over me, and I didn’t even notice the disgruntled looks from my peers as I pushed my way through
the crowd, phone held to my ear.

What if Jean was hurt? I hardly listened to the news anymore, maybe there had been a shooting at
the university, or a car crash. He took the tube into work, it wouldn’t be hard to stuff a bomb into
one of the bins on the trai-

“Elita?”

“Mum, what’s going on? Why did you call me?”

Her slightly irritated voice replaced my concerns with matching annoyance, “There’s no need to be
rude. I just wanted to call to tell you some news.”

“You called me fourteen times for some news?”

I was out of the crowds now and walking down the streets. Being so early in the morning, the usual
sounds of the city were missing, making my footsteps seem obnoxiously loud.

“If you picked up your phone I wouldn’t have to call so many times,” my mother retorted. I could
see her at home, curled up on the sofa, waiting for Dad to come home from meetings he ‘really had
to go to’.

The cold air bit with needle sharp teeth, so I pulled my blazer closer around me.

“I have a lot of work to do- it’s been ages since I’ve had to do so many subjects.”

It was basic lessons in the food groups and ‘how to reach out’ in the ward, and the intensity of
schooling in France couldn’t even touch how dedicated the students were at the academy. Nearly
everyone spent their lunches in club meetings discussing fundraising or whether it was ethical for
the newbie to get the treasury position just because they gave good head.

“Lets not get into excuses now- it’s tap class for the twins and the mothers drive me insane as it is
without you giving me attitude.”

I sighed, “What did you want to tell me?”

There was a rustling sound on the other end of the phone, like she was trying to quieten someone
down, and then her voice sounded over loud and clear.

“We’re coming over in two weeks. Your father has booked the time off, and Jean can do his
reading during the evenings.”
My mouth went completely dry.

My eyes were different from other people’s. I could see every roll, every crease and fold and
dimple of my fat and they couldn’t. All they saw was their senseless daughter who devoted too
much time into something they couldn’t even see. The daughter that traded dance school for
inpatient treatment. The failure. What would they think when they saw me?

“Elita?”

“Oh wow Mum. That sounds great. How did you manage to get the twins time off?”

Her voice was smug now, “You know that trouble the teacher got into last year with that brat and
her mother? Your father pointed her in the right direction for some legal help, so she owed me
one.”

“Do you have a place to stay? The twins could sleep at mine if they wanted,” I offered, pausing for
a moment as I debated the shortcut through a dingy ally way.

Better safe than sorry.

“Thank you, but we’ve booked a hotel. I wasn’t sure about this whole night school business, but
it’s ideal for visiting- you can come home from school and do your work, and then meet with us
during the day.”

My mind was slipping out of the conversation and into the streets. Rats rustled quietly in the bins
of closed restaurants, and somewhere in the labyrinth of streets a couple was having a row with the
window open.

Trying to keep focused, I bit my lip, “That sounds like a good plan, as long as I can get some
sleep.”

“Of course, of course. Oh, but do show Adaani and Amorelle some ‘mochi’. Don’t let them have
too much if it’s sweet though-“

“Mum?”

Her annoyance from being interrupted was obvious.

“Yes, Elita?”

“Can you email me about the details? It’s a lot to remember…”

“ Aren’t you writing it down?”

Knowing she couldn’t see, I made an exasperated gesture, “I’m walking home, Mother. It’s late.”

“ There’s no need to be rude-“

“ Mum please, I just need to rest.”

The silence lasted ten seconds, then there was a rush of air, “Fine.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll be speaking to you soon Elita.”
“Yes Mother.”

“Goodnight. Eat something proper.”

I celebrated at the sound of the click on the other end of the line.

I was almost home now. The park was to my left, abandoned (too late for teens with cans of shitty cider, too early for mothers with their screaming toddlers) and every light in my block of flats was off.

The world was dead.

Or maybe I was the dead one.

The stairwell was as sinister but ultimately harmless as usual, and I got home without incident. It felt... odd. I’d grown accustomed to being harassed, seeing shadows at the end of my bed, but there was nothing. Gloom nudged at my foot, demanding to be picked up and fussed.

My homework was abandoned, and instead I sat, back to the wall, and looked at my phone.

Adaani had insisted I load my phone with apps so I could like her pictures (and post my own—probably some surveillance thing Mother dreamed up). Instagram was complicated, but I still managed to find my old dance school’s account.

Masochist.

Scenic shots of the building, golden lights bouncing off of mirrors, the odd shot of the costume cupboard, crammed to the brim. The nostalgia hurt.

Fifteen familiar faces in three rows.

*Congratulations to our graduating class for their talent, success, and perseverance. It’s always bitter sweet to see such a gifted group of young ladies head off into the world, but we are comforted knowing that they will spread the joy of dance throughout the world.*

They were the faces of my friends, my classmates. In a split second the days spent competing and pushing each other to new heights flashed before me. We weren’t children anymore. They were young ladies. I was a stick girl.

*What made me so different from them?*

*The rot in my brain did.*

Nobody spoke to me when I went to hospital because I didn’t let them. Whatever was inside me made me tired, and I didn’t want to waste energy entertaining the motion that I had a slither of interest in getting better. Letters were tossed straight into the recycling, and eventually they stopped coming all together. It was a relief.

Fifteen sets of strong teeth. Thirty strong thighs. Fifteen beating hearts.

Unnoticed until then, my breathing had become shallow. My head felt bubbly, like it could detach off of my shoulders and float out of my window without a sound.

I was fucking *robbed.*

My whole life was spent looking forward to some place, some feeling that couldn’t exist for me.
The useless stuff sloshing around inside my fucking skull was incapable of letting me eat without scratching my skin red, or not seeing Brienne grinning at me from every box of laxatives. The months of therapy and affirmations, chanted like a spell in the hope that the goblin in the mirror would melt into a puddle, revealing the princess at last, was a lie. Sensing my disturbance, the rabbits hopped off of the bed, flinching when I tossed my phone across the room. Hot, angry tears streaked down my cheeks as I roughly tore my uniform off.

Not giving a fucking damn what Brienne did (hopefully she’d finish the job for both of us and smother me with a pillow) I kicked the oak box across the floor, yelping in pain when my brittle toes made contact.

The box skidded across the floor towards the cabinet. With everything happening I’d almost forgotten what was inside. Grimm and Gloom were crouched under the bed, their ears flat against their heads as they hid from the monster kicking their food bowl over.

Even they hated me.

I quickly walked over to the kitchen cabinet and opened it, grabbing the box. The white pill bottles gleamed in the bright fluorescent lights, but that wasn’t what I was after. No, my attentions lay completely with the razor blades in the bottom.

Shaking like a leaf in the wind (nothing but skin and bones) I clumsily picked one of the blades out of the box. Adrenaline wracked through me; my body knew what came next. My skin seemed to shrink away from my hand.

I had to grip my wrist with my other hand.

God it fucking hurt.

My skin resisted against the sharp edge for a moment, fighting the pressure.

I deserved it.

For a split second there was nothing, then my whole world was focused on the white-hot pain in my skin. There was a flash of pink flesh before blood quickly welled to the surface, running down the sides of my gargantuan thighs. Biting down on my lip until the familiar taste of pennies returned to me, I squeezed the line I’d left.

Weak/disgusting/pathetic/filthy

My toes flexed.

Left hand still guiding my right, I pressed down again, making another parallel line. There wasn’t much blood in me (not much left of anything, being honest) so even the slight blood loss made my head spin. I ignored the hot coat of red slipping down my calf and dirtying the floor, continuing to let all of the spite in me flow onto the tiles.

Time ran too fast.

An hour later my thigh was smothered in clean dressing and the floor had been mopped. I carefully prepared a special treat for the rabbits, who had not been out from the bed since the whole episode started. I was aware that rabbits could die of shock (weak hearts, too scared to move) and the idea terrified me.
“Hey little buns, I’m sorry,” I said quietly in my special ‘talking to small things’ voice. Gloom, being the bolder of the two, leaned forward, her back legs completely stretched out as she sniffed at my hands. Obviously, the sickly smell of scented soap didn’t hide my actual human smell (rotting flesh on dead bone) because she hopped forward.

My eyes filled with tears when she licked my fingers with a tiny pink tongue and headed for the bowl full of yummy fruits. Grimm hopped up soon after, not wanting to miss out on any special snacks. After briefly running his chin along my knuckles, he joined his friend at the bowl.

As usual, after one of my freak-outs, I was completely exhausted.

The smell of antiseptic strong in the air, I slipped into an uneasy sleep quickly, the rumpled duvet pulled tight over me.

"Wow, look at you."

I was back in my room at home. The posters of ballerinas and bands were torn off of the walls with bloodied hands. Brienne was perched at the end of my bed, dressed in something so frilly it was impossible to see her figure underneath. Her straw hair had been brushed out and curled loosely. A vinyl player I didn’t own was turning a record slowly, filling the room with a rhythmic, pulsing sound.

It was funeral attire.

“Looks like wittle Ewita thwew a wobbly,” Brienne teased, looking up from her peach-painted nails. Looking at me scathingly, she turned her torso to face me.

When I opened my mouth to reply, nothing came out. Of course it didn’t- Brienne was right, after all. At the end of the day, the self-mutilation was little more than a toddler tossing their food onto the floor. A quick release of emotion.

Noticing my silence, she sighed, rolling her eyes (lined in black, despite of the pastel yellow dress), “Hey, I’m just teasing~ See, it wasn’t too hard. Now, all you’d need to do next time is take some anti-clotting stuff, and ban!” Brienne snapped her fingers, a sick grin on her face, “You’d be up here, with me! Well, ‘up’, I don’t think this place has an actual direction, you know?"

“That’s because you’re not real,” I croaked, “You’re just my head trying to realise you’re dead.”

Brienne tilted her head, the grin still there, “Does it matter? You’re still talking to me, which makes you even fucking crazier than if I was a ghost, right?”

I groaned, stuffing my face into the pillow that smelled of croissants and mothballs.

Something in her voice implied genuine hurt, “You don’t want to be with me that badly? We always used to sit together in hospital, remember? You even let me vomit into that jar into your room one time- thanks for that, by the way. Tiff was patrolling the toilets that night.”

“Can’t you just leave me alone?” I asked.

There was a feather-light touch along the cut up my side.

“I’m helping you.”

The cold hand, which felt like no more than a cold puff of wind, travelled down my thigh, grazing the dressings on my cuts.
“You’re being toyed with. How long do you really think you have before ~your little boyfriend~ decides to rape you? Or drain you empty- god knows it wouldn’t be difficult from him?”

The frog in my throat was making its presence known, “I don’t know.”

Her face started to change. Slowly, her eyes lost form, a ‘skin’ sticking to the inside of her eyelids. With nothing to hold the fluid inside, grainy, black, goo slipped down her cheeks and into her mouth. Whenever she blinked I could see the remnants of her sclera coating her eyelashes.

“You’re going to go underground with me.”

Something was stopping me from speaking. Desperately, I traced my face, but the skin was completely smooth. Even as I screamed, all I could feel was my tongue poking against the skin stretched over my mouth.

Languidly, Brienned reached up and picked the white shells of her eyes off of her eyelashes, flicking them onto the floor. The bedding around her was wet with ooze.

“We’ll rot together.”

My skin was growing over my eyes and ears. No matter how quickly I clawed away at it, I couldn’t stop it. Brienne kept on talking, but everything was muffled and distorted. The dull thudding of the record stopped.

God why-

I was completely soaked in sweat, and my sheets were saturated. The floor was ice cold, and the wind drifting in through the window was even colder. Shivering hard, I pushed the curtains back and looked out across the street. It was the middle of the day, and there were a few kids playing in the park. A dog loped through the grass, looking back at its owner every few steps.

No ghosts, no ghouls.

Not that I saw, anyway.

That was why it took me so long to spot him. I was used to seeing Azusa in the night, fangs gleaming and eyes practically glowing in the dim light. When he was stood in front of my window, looking up at my dishevelled self, I barely noticed him.

He noticed me, though.

Chapter End Notes

Uni is difficult. I am struggling to write. I want to finish it though. Sorry for taking so long to update. Be safe.
Masquerade

Chapter Notes

In the previous chapter, Elita's mother called and announced that the family would be coming to visit in two weeks. Elita cut herself, and then had a dream where Brienne said some more spooky stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Still shaken from the dream, I downed one glass of ice cold water, and then another, trying to settle the churning feeling in my stomach. I could feel the cold slip down my mouse insides, stretching them from a satsuma to half a melon. It was a mistake- the sudden pressure made me feel even more nauseous. I was clutching the seat of the toilet, trying my best not to let the contents of my stomach slip down the pipes when there was a knock on the door.

At least, I thought there was, it was so quiet I was half convinced I imagined it.

Then there was another one.

Clutching my swollen stomach like a pregnant woman, I waddled over to the front door, peering through the peephole. Despite Azusa’s face being stretched by the distortion of the glass into a fucking banana, I wanted to cry. I didn’t want to do this.

A third knock.

Reluctantly, I reached out to open the door. If only the myths were true, and Azusa would be stuck hissing in the doorway unless I invited him in. Instead, he smiled weakly, and walked into my flat. It was a mess (my last concern had been picking up the papers I’d thrown to the floor in the middle of what now seemed like an embarrassing hissy-fit.

“You weren’t in school last night…” Azusa said, wrinkling his nose slightly when the pungent odour of blood and antiseptic hit him.

“Was someone else…in here?”

Thinking that somebody else might scare him off, I nodded. In a poor attempt to seem natural and relaxed, I ran my finger around the edge of a glass I’d left on the table.

“Yes.”

I let the silence stagnate, Azusa staring hard at the glass, and then at me, and then back to the glass again.

He frowned. The moment of silence seemed to stretch on forever. “You’re lying…”

Faster than I could register, he stepped forward and gripped my wrist. The threat of force made my heart thud hard enough to make my stomach shake from the force of it. Suddenly, my mouth was so dry I couldn’t come up with a retort.
“You… you did it without me…”

My heart thudded rabbit-fast, skipping and stopping dead for a moment, making my chest seize up in panic.

“Was I not enough?”

The absurdity of it made me snap back into reality.

“What?”

He gripped my wrist tighter, “You… had to do it without me… I-“

Rather than being rational, and fearing the fact that whatever supernatural entity there was in my living room took personal offence that he wasn’t hurting me enough, I was relieved. There would be no conversation of ‘why’?

Why was I doing this to them?

Because it couldn’t just be about me for once.

He took a deep breath in, and his face relaxed. This time, he had a little bag with him. I watched wide-eyed as he took out a knife, far larger and more ornate than the one he used before. For a moment, it was like I wasn’t in the room at all. Dreamily, Azusa ran his finger along the sharp edge of the blade, shuddering in delight when his pale skin finally gave way and released the redness inside of him.

“This is one of my favourites…”

My muscles were deaf to my brain’s panicked messages. I just had to push past him and get out the door, then-

“Please, sit down, Elita-san…”

My hands were too slow. They closed around nothing as the opportunity went sailing over my damn head. Reluctantly, I moved over to the plastic kitchen chair and sat down.

Still panting, Azusa walked over. Despite his position kneeling before me, we both knew who was in control of the situation. My knuckles were bone-white I was gripping the dining table so hard. My heart was thudding out of my chest again.

Tears rolled down my cheeks.

His hands, colder than ice, pushed back the thick fabric of my sleeping shorts I hadn’t washed in weeks, looking. My cheeks flushed red from shame. Finally, he found the edge of the dressings, and slowly, like a spider unreeving their spool of silk, Azusa began to unwind the dressings. The swathe of bandages around his fingers got thicker and thicker as more and more of my skin was exposed.

The cuts were barely holding themselves together. With a quick squeeze, they were open again. Red pooled in the ugly lines before overflowing, slipping down the side of my thighs. This time, the pain wasn’t an escape. It chained me down to the kitchen.

Eyes gleaming, Azusa watched as the red trails fell down my skin. Not losing their shine, his eyes flickered up to meet mine, and a smile spread across his face.
“I’ll…try harder…to please you…”

I was so focused on not vomiting down my front that I was first aware of the knife when it pressed down into my other thigh. Out of instinct, my legs jolted, pushing the knife deeper into my muscle. The cry of pain was enough to send my rabbits, which had just begun to poke their noses out from their hiding place, bolting back under the bed.

His cold hand continued to massage my thigh, constantly drawing new blood just so it could slip down my skin. Other hand gripping my skin hard, his tongue lapped at my cut. I hissed in pain, shaking. Just the flash of his fangs as he greedily sucked on my skin was enough to make my head reel.

There wasn’t enough of anything to keep my head stable. Pins and needles danced from my fingers and toes up my limbs, quickly followed by a wave of numbness that managed even to drown out the alternating aching and stinging pains as Azusa fed.

As he feasted.

It was only for a moment, but my vision blacked out, head weakly flopping forward.

“Elita?”

Half dead. Both of us.

Azusa was still there. The sticky trickles of blood stayed on my thighs, but his icy hands were gone. Suddenly the chair beneath me was gone and I was propped up on my unmade bed.

His tongue was back on me again, cleaning up the blood that now pulsed weakly from the deep stab wound. Barely able to hold my eyes open, I watched as he put his mouth on me again and again. I was just moving my hand to his hair to yank his wondering head back when something caught my attention.

The fridge door was ajar, slowly swinging open.

Brienne was stood in front of it, bent over to inspect the contents. Her hospital gown parted, vertebrae casting shadows down the rest of her pale back.

She turned.

Her teeth fell out when she smiled.

I almost vomited, hand flying from his hair to my mouth. There was nothing. Brienne was dead for fucks sake, of course she wasn’t there. God, even Azusa was looking at me like strangely.

“Put it back…” Azusa murmured, latched onto my leg again. My thighs were littered with pairs of purplish bruises. They looked deep- if he bit any harder, he’d hit bone. What would break first, my femur, or his fangs.

Hugging myself, I shook my head, “No, I feel weird.”

Maybe I wanted him to get me, snap my neck before Brienne could make me drown myself in the sink.

Instead he sat up, wiping away the blood smeared on his mouth and shin with the back of his sleeve before crawling up to me. My heart wanted to thud, but it couldn’t. There wasn’t enough
energy for that. It made up for it, however by sending another wave of nausea through me, making me curl my legs up to my stomach as I gagged.

“You really are sick…” Azusa commented, sitting up beside me on the bed. His hair was as dishevelled as usual, but his eyes were clear, unclouded by whatever made him talk to his cuts. Or maybe that was just him.

“Maybe…Ruki will know what to do…”

As scary as Azusa was, he had a reason to keep me alive. It was surely a short-term thing (dead by Christmas) but it was valid nonetheless. Ruki, on the other hand, made it pretty clear he didn’t like me. Judging from the fucking major the Mukamis lived in, whoever was looking after them had cash and connections bursting from their ears - enough to keep however many people they’d killed before out of the news. It would be too easy. The police would point at my blog and my prescriptions and the sickness rotting me away from the inside and make the natural assumption I’d gone to hang myself or throw myself off a building. My parents would wait a year or two (too embarrassing to make a public plea- better to pretend I didn’t exist at all) and then declare me dead.

Bury my favourite teddy bear in a coffin for a child (I never got to be a child I got sick instead) in the family plot and visit me on my birthday.

I shook my head.

“No. I want you to look after me.”

The smile on Azusa’s face was bright. His arms wormed around me again.

Speaking into my flat chest muffled his voice, “That makes me happy… Elita-san…”

His knee wormed between my legs as he wormed around, pulling me farther down the bed until I was no longer propped up against the wall.

“We get tired…after eating…” Azusa explained quietly, bringing me closer to him. He was so thin (must be that all liquid diet) that it barely hurt my brittle arm with his weight on it. I curled it around him, head fuzzy. It was easier to lie there. I wanted things to be easy.

It reminded me of my sisters when his hair strayed too close to my nose, making me wrinkle my face up. Even though Azusa’s skin was colder than the frigid air in the flat, it sent a wave of goose bumps flashing up my arms. Somebody wanted to touch me. Somebody, without the reason of a blood test, without the threat of the same old ‘We’re not angry you cut yourself, we just find you fucking disgusting’ wanted to hold me. When I breathed in too deeply the smell of metal and soft gauze sent me flittering back to the hospital.

The ridge of smooth, taut skin across his face brushed across my collar when Azusa shifted, murmuring something.

How old was that scar?

I counted back days and months in my head, calendar pages fluttering out of the window and lulling me into numbness.

A golden streak of sun illuminated the sink, full of cutlery used once to slice apples and lettuce leaves for Grimm and Gloom, celery and cucumber for me. The water was hot when I ran it three
days ago, but it would be cold now. That was enough to put me off doing the washing up. I was cold all the time- it took thirty minutes for the feeling in my hands to return after the walk to school. I spent half my life shivering, and the other half shaking because I didn’t have enough energy to shiver anymore.

Returning with a roar, the fuzziness in my head came back, this time accompanied by a ringing. I didn’t hear Gloom hop up to lie against my back, or Grimm follow her suit minutes later.

By the time I came to I wasn’t sure if I’d slept or just shut down. It was dark now, and the rabbits were gnawing at one of their chew toys. Head pounding, I sat up as slowly as possible. Every motion felt like my head was a boat being tossed around by tsunamis.

Azusa had gone, leaving a perfect indent on the duvet. The sheets still smelled of mint, and my thighs still ached.

There was a note on the bedside table in writing so mall and illegible that I could barely read it. Obviously, he’d taken care not to use any long words so that I could read it.

*had to go, Ruki was waiting. Lunch is on the kitchen table.*

*Azusa*

Sure enough, when I looked over there was a purple plastic box on the table.

My head was too heavy to deal with it just then.

Instead I opened up my laptop, settling it on my lap and tapping my brittle nails against the keys as it started open. It was ‘glad to see me’ apparently, but I wasn’t sure- to pick up the language faster, I’d changed my computer and phone’s language to Japanese. The characters still seemed alien, both alarmingly similar and completely different to each other simultaneously, but I understood more of them than I had weeks ago.

Once I’d been deemed trust worthy enough to have access to the internet, my parents had handed a new laptop to me, all the nasty sites (with a fair share of my own pictures floating through them) locked up.

They never considered the fact I could just reset the whole thing as soon as I was in Japan, and I never told them.

I checked my school email first, wanting to keep up the masquerade for as long as I could. I was a regular school student. I missed a day of school because I felt ill, not because I’d cut myself to ribbons. I checked my email to see if my lecturers had sent me any work, not because I was worried sick the school had called my parents. I was normal. They were the wrong ones.

A sigh of release slipped from me. Just my lecturers sending me powerpoints and homework. Formal, clinical, and not overly concerned.

There was an email from Yui.

*Hello Elita-san!*

*I’m sorry I wasn’t in yesterday. I’ll see you this evening. I had to stay at home to work on my studies.*

*With love,*

*Yui.*
A pit opened in my abdomen, sucking my stomach down into it. The obvious change in tone—something wasn’t right. I had to go in now, to check that Yui was okay. I owed her that much at least— I hadn’t even made the effort to email her. I was a disgusting, shit friend.

*Hi Yui.*

*I’ll be in today. Let’s have lunch.*

*Elita.*

I didn’t know who was reading her emails.

After I closed the tab a blank page stared back at me. I didn’t even remember what used to do with my time in the brief window after I quit dance and before coming here. I didn’t go out with my friends *I couldn’t look them in the eye anymore.* Moving made the air thin, like I was climbing a mountain. The only thing I could draw was /me/, with rolls of blubber, stuffed into leotards and swimsuits much to small for somebody as ginormous as myself.

No. Instead, I curled up under the covers, shaking from the cold, talking to girls who vomited into jars and cleaned them out in the school bathrooms. I typed in the url. I visited the site so often the keys on my keyboard were worn slightly.

There were so many words it made my head spin. The forum was split into ‘sick’, ‘sicker’, and ‘sickest’. We wore our suicide attempts and self-harm scars as badges of pride. We were in complete control, teetering on the tightrope between ‘I pass out if I stand up too quickly’, and ‘I had a fit in the shower and woke up with tap water in my lungs’.

Except, not really.

People would post, and then just…stop.

Whispers in the halls.

*Did they die?*

*Did they quit?*

On instinct, my hand tapped out Brienne’s old handle into the search bar.

I knew what happened to her.

*How many anorexics does it take to screw in a lightbulb?*

She’d posted the night she died. Back from the clinic, safe at home, teddies sat neatly on the bed visible in the picture of the dead girl. Brienne smiled at the camera, doing the peace-sign with one hand and holding her thigh for support as she hunched into view of the webcam.

There was a list of weights in her bio, the biggest crossed out. Her ‘UGW’ had been 50 kilos, and then 47, and then…

By the time I’d slammed the laptop shut, chest heaving. Tears threatened to spill down my cheeks.

Brienne was in my dreams so often that I’d forgotten she was actually dead.

*Not that it mattered when she was living under my bed-in my brain.*
Was I mourning? Or wishing she would leave?

Desperately, I tried to think of something else. The school already knew I was a mess, but the other students didn’t need to. Coming in with blotchy cheeks and red eyes after a day off would scream ‘I can’t handle my own emotions’.

Priorities. I looked down at my legs. The bruises were purple, surrounded by halos of sickly yellow that was a little too close to my skin colour for comfort. The deep cut on my leg had been stapled up again (thanks Dr. Mukami) and the skin around it was crusted with dried blood. It didn’t take too long to clean up (a towel stuffed in my mouth to keep me biting my tongue off) and after dabbing some concealer under my eyes you could hardly tell I hadn’t slept properly in days.

Brienne’s voice floated through my head so clearly I whipped around, eyes wide.

"It’s not about being okay."

The tap dripped.

It’s about pretending you are.’

“Fuck off,” I muttered to the empty room before heading in and grabbing the box of food Azusa’d left me. The rabbits were busy with their ball, pushing it around until enough hay fell out to distract their munching mouths. It wasn’t easy to clean up, but it wasn’t like I’d be hoovering until the day my family up.

It was huge and ancient and the strain of carrying it up the stairs would probably give me a cardiac arrest.

Even after kissing the rabbits goodbye, and checking the rooms, the flat didn’t feel empty as I closed the door behind me, keys clutched between my knuckles.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone. Sorry this took so long, I am tired and uni is making me even more tired than usual. I hope to get some chapters done over the Christmas holiday though. This one isn’t my best. I wanted to give a huge thank you to Sara and Heather and Jenny, who I love more than anything else. Stay safe, everyone.
The walk to school was so grateful I had to choke back sobs when I turned and saw that nobody was following me twenty meters back, or hiding poorly behind the open door of a bar. As usual, the streets were sleepy, the wait staff at the various bars and restaurants closing the doors safely behind them. The woman at the corner shop, who openly stared at my stick-legs and dead eyes, nodded as I passed. She’d noticed my purchases—paracetamol, bottled water, and a pack of cigarettes I’d abandoned in my bottom kitchen drawer. After I was discharged (released) I’d tried to take it up, but the tightness in my chest made it hard enough to breathe without the extra aggravation.

No food though. No tinned spaghetti or chocolate bars in my little wire basket. Not if I wanted my little wire rib-cage to stay visible.

I didn’t realise how shitty I looked until I struggled up the steps to the school. Somebody literally turned to look at me I was dead. I wasn’t a new student anymore, and I knew they weren’t commenting to their friends about how nice my hair looked in that half-concerned, half-mocking tone. To avoid their gazes, I ducked into the bathroom, and uselessly toyed with my hair and pinched my cheeks until the whole ‘walking corpse’ thing was a little less accurate. Besides, I had history first, and the last thing that Yui needed was to worry about me.

As usual, she was sat at the desk, carefully laying out the textbook and her notepad on the table. Her pencil had a little repeating pattern of cartoon lambs with pastel bows. Yui, with the ruby red eyes, Yui, with the soft voice and kind smile, looked fucking horrendous. I wasn’t reverting to my pre-teen bitchiness either, really, she looked like she’d been through a war. We were matching shades of pasty, and the deep purple rings under her eyes could compete with those of the weird teddy-bear boy Azusa’d briefly mentioned.

“Yui, are you alright? Je-“

“Elita-san, it’s good to see you! Sit down, I found a really cool revision website I want to show you.”

Her tone reminded me of the nicer nurse on the ward—friendly, but wouldn’t take a single spoonful of shit from you. Obediently, I sat down, sliding my hefty bag under my desk. Instead of pulling out her phone like I expected, Yui slid her notepad open and flicked to the back page. There was a paragraph in shakily-written script. It took me a few minutes to decipher it.

*I’m sorry I couldn’t come in. They wouldn’t let me leave the house— I had to lie and say we had a big assignment due in for today so Reiji would insist I came in.*

*If somebody asks you about it, say that it went well, and that I stuttered a little during the conclusion.*

*I really don’t know if I’ll be here again. They don’t like it when I’m here. I have to be careful.*

*When you’re done, say thank you, and ask to take the page. Tear it up and get rid of it—don’t let anyone see!*  

*Love, Yui.*
In my most convincing voice (it could disarm doctors, but would it be any use against the undead?) I smiled, “Thank you, Yui-san. Could I take the page? I’m not very good at, uh, remembering things.”

“Of course.”

Neatly, she tore the page out of her notebook, not leaving a single scrap of the paper inside the book. I folded it up into a tiny square and stuffed it into my breast pocket just as the lecturer walked into the room. My mind was reeling. The teacher was engaging, and glanced over occasionally to make sure they weren’t going to fast for me to understand, but I was on another planet. The idea of Yui being captured had appeared in my mind, but as a distant, far off possibility. Familiar nausea bubbled in my belly like a cauldron. Digging my nails into the back of my hand as I scribbled something in French, I tried to think.

First, there were the police. However, unless I could guarantee the shitbags wouldn’t be able to deflect the claims then it would only alert them to her telling somebody about the situation, and from the looks of her, Yui couldn’t take any more punishment. Besides, if I tried to explain either of our situations, it would just end up in me donning a straight-jacket, shifted to the nearest psychiatric facility as my parents debated on whether a lobotomy would be viable. It didn’t work out so badly for the Kennedy’s, did it?

Countless possibilities, each more awful than the last, flashed through my head. Yui beaten black and blue, then tossed down cold stone stairs into a clay pit; Yui, who’d done her best to help me, filling a bathtub with her own blood.

The lecturer was making their concluding remarks when the awful, gut-wrenching realisation hit me. We were helpless. I couldn’t do anything for Yui. We were two shipwreck survivors, clinging to each other as the sharks circled.

How many other bodies floated in the water, as lifeless as the doors and chairs and splinters of lifeboats surrounding us?

Suddenly everyone was standing. Not wanting to seem as dazed as I was, I stood quickly, gripping onto the edge of the desk hard as I waited for the clouds drifting across my vision to pass. When I knew I could stand, I began to pack my things into my bag hastily, managing to catch Yui as she passed behind me.

“Let’s go to the library.”

“And skip?” She looked at me like I was mad, ruby eyes crinkled in confusion.

The lecturer looked up.

“No, just to print of the powerpoint for the next lesson,” I said slowly, waiting until the curious eyes drifted down to the desk again.

Yui nodded, and then we left, taking a right while the rest of the group turned left towards the mathematics classrooms. The hallways were busy, camouflaging us as we headed towards the library. So busy that we didn’t notice a tall, dark figure breaking off from the main crowd and stalking behind us.

It was almost empty when we arrived, only students printing out last-minute assignments disturbing the silence. A few, small tables in the centre were occupied by students, earphones in, not paying any attention to the two terrified girls, and paying even less attention to one of the most
well-respected students in the school going to the library between lessons. We lost ourselves in the labyrinth of bookshelves, and ended up on two squashy armchairs. It felt like we were two little shrews, trying to hide inside the cat’s own den.

Yui sighed, gently gripping at the hem of her blazer. She was so pasty I worried she was going to have a damn heart attack before the vampires even got to her.

I leaned across the small table, reaching out to put my freezing hand on her forehead.

“Are you alright?”

“The note, get rid of the note!” She squealed, motioning towards my shirt pocket.

“What note, Miss Komori?”

Yui screamed, slapping her hands over her mouth. Library etiquette was vital, even when being stalked by fucking weirdo vampires who only wore one glove.

I was stuck, paralyzed completely by the utter contempt in the thing’s stare. I was nothing. He could snap my neck before my screams would reach the studying students, and then wash their memories clean. My records would be carefully burned in an open fire, and that would be that. Another teenager in way over their head, targeted in a foreign land.

For a split second, the hopelessness translated to a mad kind of bravery. It didn’t matter what I did, so I may as well give it my best shot.

I reached into my pocket and tossed the note into my mouth. With boldness I didn’t know I still possessed, I looked the bespectacled demon in the eyes. Well, into the space just below his eyes, I didn’t want to vomit right then and there, no matter how much adrenaline was coursing through me.

He growled, “May I ask what exactly you are doing with that piece of paper?”

“I am eating it. I… forgot my lunch.”

He stepped forward, crossing the space between us in one easy stride. The paper stuck in my throat, momentarily choking me, until the muscles in my oesophagus forced it into my stomach.

Still staring at me, he reached back, grabbing Yui’s wrist. She gasped in pain, twisting her arm desperately in a futile attempt to make him loosen his grip.

“Miss Komori, would your friend mind telling me what was on that note?”

“Reiji-san, I am sorry!” Yui blurted out, looking deliberately at me, “Elita-san was struggling with an answer, and I didn’t want to-“

“Did I ask you to lie to me?” He demanded, yanking Yui upwards. She was stood awkwardly, unable to straighten her legs fully, but unable to sit down either. Apparently, I had a fucking fetish for being beaten up by vampires, because I stood up, reaching out towards him.

“She’s not lyi-“

It was like getting smacked with a cricket bat. The force of the blow sent me sprawling back against the chair. His eyes glowed red with anger, his bare hand fixing the cuff of his white glove.
My head swam and my legs trembled and I was certain the man/monster/thing was going to pull out a hot poker from his back pocket and shove it down my throat. At least his hands were off Yui (she was rubbing her wrist, glancing quickly between us and the way out of the seating area).

“You’re a foul little creature, aren’t you?”

His gloved fingers took hold of my chin and yanked my head painfully backwards.

“No wonder that Mukami mongrel was interested.”

My mouth was full of red metal. It leaked between my lips and down my chin, pattering against the last clean shirt I had. Dimly, I recognised that I’d have to do a load of washing if I ever left the library.

“Reiji-san…leave her.”

There he was, my saviour in a beret. I could practically see the special-effect smoke whirling around him. Azusa, bandages and all, marched through the room, and positioned himself between my crumpled form and Yui’s…acquaintance.

“I wondered when you were going to show yourself,” Reiji wrinkled his nose and pushed his glasses up. He was almost a foot taller than Azusa, making it look like a twelve-year-old was standing up to some BDSM demon.

“Don’t worry, I’m not interested. How much can she hold anyway, four litres?” He scoffed, “I’m surprised Ruki-san would allow you to keep her.”

Azusa frowned, his bottom lip pulling downwards. The bottom of his fangs were pearly white.

“If Eve wants to come… come with us… then she can…”

Eve?

The fuck was an ‘Eve’?

With just a pointed look, Yui gathered her things and stood up shakily. All the colour had drained from her face, and her eyes looked like drops of blood in snow. Reiji just stared at Azusa and I, but luckily, he smiled. It was hardly kind, but it sure beat getting slapped across the room.

“Don’t worry. I take very good care of Miss Komori.”

Another look he left, Yui trailing behind him. She was smarter than I- even if I was a disposable blood bag, there was not a shred of doubt in my mind that Reiji would beat her black and blue if there was any more trouble. It was probable that he already knew what was on the note (I was as useless as a wet paper towel even with the information she’d given me) and this was all…. A game. A sick fucking game.

I shivered, and sat up slowly. The blow made my head reel, and the fact I hadn’t eaten in days only made the dizziness worse.

My hand shook as I pointed towards where Reiji and Yui had stood.

“What is going on?”

…. 
It was freezing cold on the school roof, a fact Azusa had probably overlooked. I drew my legs in under myself and pulled my coat close around me as he talked about things I could hardly understand. Extinction, hybridism, strange fires…

“But, this has nothing to do with me?”

“No…you’re just…”

“Human?”

He smiled weakly, and sat down next to me, his side pressing against mine, “Yes.”

“Thank the Lord,” I muttered, reverting back to my mother tongue so I wouldn’t have to explain that I didn’t want to be involved in any weird supernatural shit, let alone scientific, lets-experiment-on-orphans supernatural shit.

I didn’t know how long I’d been out on the roof, but I was freezing cold and I wanted to go home to my flat and wail like a lost lamb have a nice rest and a glass of water or two. I was lucky. I still had the illusion of privacy in the form of a tiny studio flat; Yui had to go home to things I couldn’t even imagine.

“I need to get home,” I began slowly, carefully standing up so I wouldn’t just topple over like a fell tree. “The rabbits need to be fed.”

“Okay…”

Was God looking down on me gladly? Was this a reward for standing up for Yui?

He stood up too (far more fluently than I could manage).

“I’ll stay with you… The Sakamakis… might come back.”

I looked back over my shoulder at the lines of warm light escaping through the windows and the crack between the door and the doorframe. I wasn’t stupid- I was misshapen and ugly on the inside- regular people cringed when they saw me stagger up the stairs. All of the /things/ I’d met so far had porcelain skin and clever eyes and even my value as a blood bag was questionable.

On top of that, the superficial qualities that gave me safety, I had as much relevance watching Yui’s life slipping out of her as I would have in Paris or the morgue.

Would it be fun to kill somebody that wanted to die anyway?

“Why?”

“Kanato…the brat…” his lip visibly curled- obviously they weren’t the best of pals, “Would do it… to avenge his teddy…”

Well.

That certainly made Azusa’s self-mutilation seem more pedestrian.

I let him lead me towards the door, grateful for the few minutes in the warm school before heading back out into the cold for the walk home. By now, everything was closed, even the little corner shop, and as we moved further and further away from the school our footsteps seemed louder and louder. It was witching hour- when all of the nasty things came out of their caves and crypts to haunt the living.
I strayed from the path.

I tore at the gingerbread house with both hands, letting the clumps crumble between my fingers before I could stuff them into my mouth.

Maybe I was one of the ghouls, mouth cavernous and an insatiable appetite.

Finally, we arrived back at my block of flats. It had started to drizzle on the way home, but I didn’t realise how wet I was before I got inside the tiny flat. The rabbits, who kept better time than I, hopped out to greet me, probably concerned about whether this alteration in the schedule would change their dinnertime.

“Hello little dumplings,” I cooed, scooping Gloom up into my arms. She wriggled for a moment before accepting her fate. Carefully, I sat down on the bed, petting her velvety fur. When clean and dry, rabbits had a slight sweet, warm smell. Not bothering about Azusa’s opinions (he’d assault me regardless as to whether I smelled my rabbits or not) I let my head fall forward.

For a moment the world was dark and fuzzy and sweet smelling.

I wish I could’ve stayed.

The bed shifted as Azusa sat down next to me. Grimm, the traitor, was standing up on his hind legs, sniffing around Azusa’s bandages and uniform. The smell of blood, strong enough for even me to smell, obviously unnerved him. He went back onto all fours and turned, sniffing at Gloom’s face.

Azusa frowned, “He doesn’t like me…”

“It’s the blood. It scares them.”

His cold hands wrapped gently around Grimm’s middle. He lifted the wriggling rabbit up, almost like he was inspecting him. Maybe he was a rare vampire-detecting breed.

A little late to be useful, though.

“Good.”

My laptop was on the floor, left half-open. Its battery had probably died- when I got too tired I didn’t even bother to turn it off. The steady hum of the fan helped me sleep anyway. I knew I should message Jean.

I didn’t want Azusa (or his brothers, or the Sakamakis, or even Yui) to know about my family. They didn’t deserve this.

"But you do."

Brienne’s voice rang so clearly in my head that I turned to Azusa, plopping Gloom down on the bed.

“Did you just hear somebody speak?”

Either way, the answer wouldn’t satisfy me.

A yes meant, ‘yep, you’re definitely haunted, and one day you’re going to feel her hair worm up your legs in the shower before yanking you into the sewers (you’d fit in so well there)’. A no, on the other hand, would just be a one-way fucking ticket to ~crazy confirmation land~.
He hesitated, and then shook his head.

“No…I’m sorry…”

Apparently I looked so desperate that he actually tried to reassure me.

“Don’t worry… I was too busy…patting the rabbit. I missed it… that’s all…”

If there were thirsty vampires, then certainly ghosts were well in the realm of ‘unlikely, but possible’.

I flopped backwards on the bed, awkwardly worming around until a section of the duvet was freed and available.

Azusa slowly let Grimm down onto the floor and, in a motion that would have been comforting coming from literally anyone else, pulled the duvet up to my chin. He tucked the duvet in around, moulding the bedding around the swell of my stomach and the rolls spreading out from my thighs.

“Sleep. I’ll keep watch…”

He stayed sat up on the bed.

It was tired, and I was warm; I needed an excuse for why I let myself fall asleep with the tired monster sat mere inches from me.

Brienne thought it was as pathetic as I did.

*Her voice slipped into the room before I fell completely into her world of cushions and candy floss. The dark of the room was replaced with soft, fluffy clouds. The ground beneath me was sodden with blood it looked like cherryade but I knew better I knew I’d taste metal if I licked my fingers clean.*

*In the near distance, Brienne sat on a teal sofa, white-stockinged feet tucked neatly underneath her. She was knitting (more of a clue to this being a dreamland than the clouds- she’d never had the patience for crafts). The thing trailed off the sofa, its pearly white ends stained brown with blood.*

*Slowly, I approached, my legs feeling tired even in this dreamland. When I was a few paces away, her head snapped up.*

“You dumb fucking bitch.”

“Brie-“

“You literally let him sit by you. He’s still there, by the way, I can see. He gave the rabbits half an apple. It was a miracle you had something in for them.”

“Please.”

She motioned at me with a knitting needle. Upon closer inspection they were ribs, white from the sun, and clean from whatever scavengers had picked the flesh off however long ago, “Elita, girlie, I’m here to help you.”

*I perched on the end of the sofa and tried to ignore the soft squelch of sodden ground beneath my feet. Brienne looked different. The lavender translucence of the rings around her eyes had spread*
across all her skin, and she flickered like a lightbulb about to burst.

The clicking of the knitting needles continued.

“You’re not here for you,” I replied, throat dry, “You’re here for you.”

“No shit,” Brienne replied, rolling her eyes dramatically.

She corrected herself, “Well, for both of us. I’m lonely and bored, and you actually want to die more than I ever did.”

Somehow, I was aware of everything going on in the real world as well as sugar-land. Azusa was sat on the bed, his back against the wall and head lolled onto one shoulder. Still, his dreamy eyes were fixed on me.

A memory flashed to me- cuddled up on the sofa with the twins, a nature documentary on TV. Mother and Father were asleep side by side, wrinkled mouths open, empty glasses of mulled wine in their hands. Jean was upstairs talking to his girlfriend, and when the program went quiet for a moment, I could hear his voice drifting down from upstairs. Two orca were tossing a seal around, flipping it into the air. The squeaked and clicked in delight as their battered prey made a weaker and weaker attempt to swim away each time it landed back in the ocean.

‘As practice, young orca will often play with their prey. This helps to form familiar bonds as well as hone their hunting skills.’

They tore the seal apart, blood streaming from between their mouths as they carried hunks of it away into the deep blue sea.

‘However, it may be for a simple reason- it’s fun.

The clicking of the cetaceans became the rhythmic clicking of knitting needles together.

“Wakey wakey~ Look at you, you’re so tired you can’t even stay awake in a dream!”

She gestured wildly with her knitting needles again.

I groggily shook my head, looking away from the blood-soaked ground and back up to the sky again. The clouds, which were a candy-floss pink at the beginning of the dream B nightmare B were turning lavender. There was a lining of sky blue on the far edges.

“It looks like I’ll have to get back,” Brienne sighed, trying to hide her wicked smile with her knitting needles, “I do have better things to do, you know? But, I have a proposition for you.”

“What is it?”

Brienne stood up. She was in an outfit I hadn’t seen before- leggings, and a t-shirt with ‘nap queen’ emblazoned on it- and took my hands in hers. They were scalding hot, enough to make me sweat.

“If you wake up and he does whatever weird shit he wants, and you don’t go and swallow every pill in that little cupboard of yours, then you’re a fucking pussy as well as a disgusting, puss filled failed abortion, okay?”

Her voice wasn’t hers. My hands were burning.
I wanted it to stop.

I would’ve done anything to make it stop.

“Yes. I will. Promise.”

She gave my hands one last squeeze, “You run along now~ Leave me alone to make this- my parents always worried about me getting smothered in my own blankets when I was a baby. They deserve a visit, don't you think?”

A closer look at the blanket. It was patterned with little ducks, their beaks sunshine-yellow.

I awoke with a start. Azusa was nudging me hard.

Her hands were still on mine.

Chapter End Notes

Hello pals. I hope you enjoy this chapter- it's a little longer than usual and I am proud of that.
“Are you…okay?”

I stared at him, hard? Was that his voice, or Brienne’s? Was the world of candy floss and bright red blood dream land, or was it the sweaty, musty sheets and the thing with sad eyes sat at the end of the bed? I shook my head, ignoring the pulsing of my heart in my brain, and pushed my greasy hair back from my face. I really needed to shower, but I’d seen enough horror films to know that nothing good could come from being malnourished, naked, and alone.

A triple threat.

“Elita?”

Back to reality. Motioning towards the sink, I smiled weakly, “Could you get me a glass of water?”

He nodded. I watched him move with eyes big as saucers- it wasn’t the confident walk of Kou, let alone the bull-in-a-chinashop stop of Yuma. Azusa walked carefully, slowly, barely making a noise as he let the tap run. Azusa was small, no, Azusa was tiny.

Was it the all liquid diet?

I concentrated hard on the feeling of the cold water slipping down me, pooling in my stomach. I could trace every movement of the soft, pink tubes inside of me, trace them across my round tummy with a black marker. Did they still work? That was a mystery.

Azusa waited until the glass was drained before pushing a peach into my hands. 39 calories. The skin was firm, flesh plump- I thought my weak teeth were going to snap in half when I bit down. The sweetness flooding through my mouth seemed to affect me immediately. I could feel each chemical bond breaking in my blood, racing towards my brain. My vision seemed clearer than before, colours brighter (surely not).

I hated it.

Every bite made me want to sob, but I knew I couldn’t stop. With mechanical movements, the fruit was devoured until just the stone lay in my sticky hands.

“We have…lots to do…” Azusa stated, fingers lingering over mine as he retrieved the stone. Even with the sugar fizzing in my brain, he was too quick for me to react. After dropping to one knee, he took my finger into his cold mouth. Like a rabbit, I jumped, jamming my digit against the roof of his mouth before snatching it out.

“Fucking gross,” I muttered, grateful that he couldn’t understand French. Not waiting for a reply, I stalked over to the sink, turning the water as hot as it would go and rubbing my hands viciously until sickly blue turned into pink.

Obviously, I’d learned some things about Azusa. Importantly, he could move silently, unless he wanted me to hear him. The bed sheets rustled. My muscles were taught, eyes scanning the counter for something to defend myself with.
“I’m sorry…”

Slowly, I turned my head. Azusa was stood, eyes low. The rabbits hopped around his feet.

There was nothing to do but sigh.

“What do we need to do?”

Those next few hours were the most productive I’d had since the start of the new term. Azusa and I lugged all of my laundry (spotted with burgundy blood or flecks of vomit) down to the laundry room. Even carrying the small bag of old socks and tights made my heart thud erratically, so I was grateful to have the deceptively strong Azusa with me.

We sat in silence by the washing machine (there was a constant queue of passive-aggressive notes reminding people that ‘patience was a virtue’ and ‘if they found their wet washing on the floor again there would be trouble’).

As the washing machine rumbled, I let my mind drift off. I was so exhausted—was back home.

It was time forgotten, sandwiched between the hospital and Japan. I would forget about it, slowly at first, then all at once, until I saw myself leaving the hospital and heading straight to Japan as life flashed before my eyes one last time.

Since Dad was at work all day and the twins had school, it was just my mother and I rattling around the house. It had only been a few months, but it wasn’t my home anymore. The carpets I’d scrubbed meticulously with detergent had been ripped up, replaced with polished floorboards. In the bathroom, the loose tiles I’d used to hide razors and pills and slices of potato the size of pennies were gone too.

My back was against the washing machine. I’d been set daily tasks to keep me busy. That day it was laundry, and then dying long lengths of ribbon for the twin’s recital costumes. My head was nodding, exhausted, when Mother came into the utility room.

She looked so tired.

Aunt Felicite was rarely spoken about. Occasionally, on Christmases that seemed especially cold and dark, my mother would bring out the photo albums. Felicite was tall and lanky and had a gap between her two front teeth. A year later, Felicite was tall and lankier and smiled with her mouth closed.

A year later. Her skin was translucent. She looked like me.

The sickness eating away at the daughter she loved felt like rewatching a childhood film— the same old scenes, but all of the surprise twists seemed obvious now.

“Elita.”

She was holding a glass of cloudy water. It was a special mix for little stick people— electrolytes, sugars, fortified with a crushed-up vitamin tablet. I held my arm out and took it from her.

“Thank you.”

I sipped at the beverage slowly (gulping it down upset my mouse stomach, and being sick was a one-way ticket back to the hospital) and kept on looking at my mother. Slowly, she sat down on the
floor, stockinged legs stretched out in front of her.

“Elita Yvette DuVal…”

Slowly, I put the glass down beside me, careful of breaking whatever spell was being cast over the room. After I came back home, being alone with my mother would always result in an argument, but- it felt different. The washing machine hummed contentedly against my back, drowning out the excited shouts of the school kids heading home for the weekend.

I smiled wanly.

“Mum.”

Her lipstick bled into the cracks of her mouth. She hadn’t aged well.

“I want to go somewhere different. We’ve got the flat and the doctor and school sorted out anyway. If I struggle, my English is decent. People over there seem pretty understanding…”

Pausing, like a cat before it pounced, Mother tensed her jaw, and then crossed the line.
“You could start up dance again-“

“No.” I looked her dead in the eye. My cold fingers gestured at my feet.

“I’ve fucked up my bones,”

(brITTLE like a bird’s)

“And my muscles,”

(my body had to get the energy from somewhere)

“And if I have to go somewhere and be the fat girl again I will kill myself.”

You had to be thin to do well in dance. Yes, there were a few bigger girls, but they were tokens, there to look good on the brochures, but they never got the starring roles. The other girls never talked to them, afraid whatever disease had made them bloat up like a balloon would spread to them. Dance was hard, but it was even harder if you didn’t fit into the flock.

Mother looked at me hard, looking right through me. The jig was up. Now she knew what to look out for (strong language as bait, a bird feigning a broken wing to keep the fox away from its nest) my manipulation was pointless.

“Ballet makes you happy, we both know that.”

“No, Mum. It made me like this.”

The thinspo pictures were always of legs like dangling strings, or ribcages jutting from skin like a sinking ship. They were never of the greasy hair and spotty skin and the flash of concern when your front tooth started to wriggle a little too loosely in its socket.

It was understandable though. That wasn’t very #aesthetic.

The machine entered the spin cycle. The shuddering had dislodged whatever inside my brain had been keeping all of the nasty, angry words from rushing out in a torrent of disgust directed at the wrong person.

“Armorelle told me that what you’ve said to my teacher, that I have Lupus disease. What the fuck?”

“Elita-“

“Awful convenient for you, isn’t it? Poor circulation, rashes, weight loss, joint pain? Wow, a match made in heaven!”

My voice had risen to a shout without realising.

“When I go away, will you tell them I died? Will you hold a fake funeral with a fake coffin filled with fucking bricks?”

She ran her hands through her hair, revealing the streaks of grey hidden strategically by the ashy blonde. “Stop it, stop it! You don’t know what it’s been like for us! We thought you were going to die.”

I scowled at her, “What a disappointment then.”
“Don’t you dare speak to me like that.”

The tender moment was gone as quickly as it came.

Mother was shorter than me by a good 15cm, but I’d developed a hunch in hospital, and her rage spilled out of the room into the hallway.

“Did you see your father start smoking again? Jean came back home to look after the girls so we could spend hours waiting for you to talk to us in hospital while you pushed a damn domino from one side of the table to the other.”

I was gasping from the force of her anger. My hands gripped at the washing machine (clothes stagnating in the drum).

“I can’t wait to leave,” I hissed, “So I won’t have to be such a fucking blemish on your perfect family record.”

When I turned and stormed out of the room, using my whole stick body to throw the door open, I looked so much like Aunt Felicite that I heard Mother getting a drink at 3pm.

I didn’t speak to her for the next two weeks. At the airport, I turned to stone when she hugged me, and flushed the good luck charm she’d given me down the loo.

I hadn’t been able to get rid of the letter though. It slept safe and sound between my photo album and a tattered childhood story book.

Azusa was as far away as me, his grey eyes focused on something far away. From what he’d told me, he didn’t have any family. Being left on the street was a pretty common circumstance for most children in the 1850s, and he was no exception.

When the machine stopped, we moved my clothes from the washing machine to the dryer, and let it run.

As much as I hated it, the family visit needed to be talked about. The fact I had to ask for ‘permission’ was fucking ridiculous, but I didn’t want to be tossed into a cellar or some shit the day they arrived because Azusa thought I was trying to escape.

“Azusa?”

“Hm?”

Catapulted back into reality. It was incredible how quickly his eyes could focus, pupils darker than anything I’d ever seen before. It wasn’t often I saw him in bright light, and for the first time I noticed they were slightly pinched at the top and bottom.

Ambush predators often have vertical-slit pupils to better judge close distances.

“My family is coming to see me in two weeks.”

His brow furrowed.

“I want to see them.”

“I don’t think…Ruki-kun…will allow it.”

I grit my teeth.
“They have come all the way from France. It would be more suspicious if I didn’t show up.”

Azusa shrugged. It wasn’t his motion though— it was Ruki’s. God knew how many people they’d lured into the wood of the dead and the lost, or how long they’d been doing it. What more was one concerned family to them?

My muscles were tensed, wound up like a spring. I tried to calm down— calling Azusa a little bitch was hardly going to help— and closed my eyes. A deep breath in, eight counts, and then out through the nose.

“What if one of you came with me? You would still be able to make sure I didn’t say anything, and I’d be able to see my family.”

He hummed for a moment, then nodded.

“I’ll ask… I can’t guarantee it though…”

At least it was a possibility. The dryer came to a halt and beeped, announcing its, and the conversation’s, conclusion. Waiting was all I could do, as much as it pained me.

Side by side, we put the washing away, folding my thick jumpers neatly, then just cramming my socks and tights in around them. Gloom and Grimm hopped over, excited at the prospect of new nest material.

“Can they…?”

I gently scooped up Gloom and set her atop the freshly cleaned washing.

“Just make sure they don’t eat it. It will clog them up.”

*Juliet ate cotton wool to fill her up. They turned into a bezoar. What happened to her?*

**Dead probably.**

The rabbits hopped around, digging at the tights, claws snagging on the stretchy material. I never minded ladders much— I wore three pairs at a time, so my skin was never exposed (even if it looked a little odd).

Azusa reached over, scratching at Grimm’s forehead. He lowered it, chattering his teeth together contentedly.

“I like rabbits…”

“Me too.”

He withdrew his hand, earning a confused look from Grimm.

“Ruki-kun won’t let us have pets…”

Humming in response, I lifted the two rabbits out of the wardrobe and shuffled backwards to close the door.

“Too messy?” I guessed, glancing back at the floor. No matter how many times I cleaned, there was always hay scattered across the linoleum.

Azusa nodded, still stroking Grimm, “Yes… I don’t think…. I’d be good at looking after them…”
In a flash of sympathy that surprised even me, I gestured towards my own animals.

“You can help me look after Gloom and Grimm then.”

His face lit up like a Christmas tree. I delegated the task of getting the greens to Azusa, and changed their bedding and litterbox while he was out. Honestly, it was getting hard to look after them when all I wanted to do was decompose to the mattress.

“I’m back…” Azusa announced, an old tote bag filled with vegetables in his hand.

Knowing what the rustle of bags meant, Gloom and Grimm hopped up to him, standing on their back legs to get a better idea of what was on the menu for the next week.

After washing the small vegetable knife, I motioned him over, “I’ll show you how to make their food.”

They mostly ate hay to keep their teeth worn down, but the different textures and tastes of the produce gave them some enrichment, especially since I spent most of my time sleeping or at school or crying in the shower.

Silently, Azusa followed my directions, washing the leaves carefully. Fifteen minutes, and no stab wounds, later, we had finished cutting everything we needed up.

“You can give it to them, if you’d like.”

His face lit up again, and he took the two heavy bowls down to the ground, making a chittering sound with his teeth.

“Justin… used to talk to the rabbits…”

I stared blankly.

The scar?

Or its namesake?

Obviously not picking up on my confusion, Azusa continued, “We’d wait in the fields… in summer… for them to come out…”

Azusa frowned, “I didn’t like to kill them… they were just… living…”

My mouth dried up. What could I say? There was always food on the table, and a warm bed to sleep in. Hell, even if there wasn’t one at home, the government would provide you with something. Nothing in modern day France could compare.

At least not the one I’d experienced.

“You had to live too…” I commented quietly.

A pregnant pause filled the air. Azusa’s cold hands continued to stroke Gloom’s back, too occupied eating to bother with the thing rubbing her back.

“I wonder why… I was lucky… and not them…”

Deliberately moving as quietly as I could, I moved so that the tiny table was between us.
“I won’t lose… anyone else…”

All I could hear was my heart thudding in my chest. I knew he could hear it too /an evolutionary adaption/ and tried desperately to calm it.

He straightened up (only an inch taller than me, a sign of hard times) and turned back towards me.

“Stay home today… I’ll tell you a story.”

With a completely defeated look on his face, he sat down on the end of the bed before patting the space next to him.

_The curtains opened. Act One commenced._

Chapter End Notes

Hello little moths. I’m sorry it’s been so long since I updated. I had exams and then a family member died and then I was just sad. I hope you like it.
Hey everyone. This chapter involves explicit mentions of self harm and of execution. If this material triggers you, please do not read this chapter. I will add a summary in the beginning of the next one. Read responsibly.

What year was it?

Cuza hadn’t been elected yet, and the news of a failed revolution had faded into insignificance for people as poor as those living in the small town of evils. What was it called? Would he even be able to pronounce it after so long, the rolling ‘r’s lost from muscle memory? Sometimes, he would forget where he came from in the first place. Once Azusa crept into the living room so quietly Ruki didn’t notice. He was frowning over a Romanian text. Even with Karlheinz’ tutorship, Ruki wasn’t immune from the effects of time.

The first thing that came to mind was the hunger. As masochistic as he was, there was no way of romanticizing the cramps that left him breathless and curled up on the streets. After being left at the market (a family too big to support itself needed to make sacrifices, and Azusa- or whatever his name was back then- was too dreamy to be of much use) he’d found his place in one of the many wondering gangs of other homeless children.

Being absentminded didn’t allow for many... practical applications. Not sly enough to steal, and without the brute strength needed to defend their turf from the other settlements of children, too mature for their age.

He found his use though.

Justin, Christina, and Melissa.

His three dearest friends, nearing the top of the hierarchy of the gang. They were bigger and stronger than him, skin riddled with bruises and scratches from rushed escapes with their spoils.

Azusa found his purpose.

If something didn’t go well, or whatever raid during the day had failed, that was when Azusa stepped in. Or, more accurately, laid down.

It was incredible how long they could beat him, his malnourished body battered by a barrage of angry fists and feet. Despite the pain (ignore the crunch of bone, the way his nose shifted left halfway down the bridge) it felt BgoodB. He was BusefulB for once.

Down at the bottom of the town, past the houses that huddled together like songbirds in winter, there was an old slate pit. Digging deep into the hillside until it became obvious the town would collapse into the man-made cavern, the towns folk had made their money carting it off to the capital, tired mules huffing with exertion from the weight of their load.

Long after the supply had dried up (veins of grey empty) Azusa had tumbled. It was in winter, when
even the huntsmen in the village struggled to bring home more than half-dead ducks, and the gang
was getting desperate.
The plan was simple, devised by desperate children. Christina, Justin, and Melissa would grab a
loaf of bread each as Azusa made a show of pick-pocketing, a distraction. He was the smallest and
scrappiest, and his odd nature made him a target for the suspicious villagers anyway.

Cursed

Breathing so shallowly it made him light headed, Azusa bolted through the dying shrubs, leaping
over abandoned rabbit holes. The thorns tore at his sides, but the pain went unnoticed. Surely, he’d
been running for long enough.
There was a dense thicket, too tangled for the adults to pass through, but some creature had forced
its way though enough times to create a tiny tunnel of small space. Going at such a pace, it was
hard to stop his legs pistoning beneath him. The pit was approaching. Quickly, Btoo quicklyB,
Azusa tried to turn. His foot slipped on the cold grass, and his fragile body bounced over the ledge.

For seven seconds his world was a whirl of cold stone and white hot, pulsing pain. His head was
flung so far back before being whipped forward again that Azusa spent a minute just checking his
head was still attached to his shoulders once the lurching stopped.

By the time Azusa’d gathered himself to head back up to town, the sun was sinking below the trees,
the lack of its watery light barely darkening the landscape.

The streets, usually alive with the murmuring of water and rats and children, was silent.

Azusa slept alone that night.

Maybe if his body didn’t yell in protest whenever he moved, the bustle of in the main square
would’ve gone unnoticed to him. Wearily, Azusa stood, caked in blood and mud. His head throbbed
but staying asleep was dangerous. It was all too easy to drift off the path, deep into the thicket,
wolves waiting hungrily.

No. He needed to see what was going on.

The stalls that inhabited the cobbled space were replaced by a wooden… thing? It was about four
meters tall, with a ‘branch’ that stuck out sideways from the top. It ‘s height was even more
obvious due to it being stood on a rickety platform.

Swaying gently, pushed by winds too weak for him to feel, three ropes hung from the ‘branch’.

Everyone’s eyes were fixed on the platform, so Azusa cautiously stepped closer, standing on his tip
toes to better see what was going on. A man dressed all in black tugged three crates onto the
platform, nudging them until they were perfectly positioned under the ropes.

Stranger and stranger.

Silently he kept watch, the adults stood before him too busy with their gossip to pay much mind.
Whatever was about to conspire made his transgression yesterday forgettable. That meant it was
big-

Three familiar, squirming figures.

Azusa could actually feel his pupils dilating, starvation-shivers turning to full on uncontrollable
shaking.
Justin. Christina. Melissa.

Each one was held firmly by the shoulders by the biggest men in the town. Their attention was focused on the slight man with a ratty face stood at the front of the platform. Despite the biting cold, his smile was gleeful.

A silence fell over the crowd.

“Yesterday,” he began, the attention of the crowd flooding to his head, “these three thieves were spotted trying to steal a loaf of bread each- something we all work hard for.”

A murmur of agreement rippled through the crowd. Azusa dug his nails into his filthy palms.

The man gestured at the baker, who was stood front and centre, apron still on.

“Dalca depends on selling his bread to survive. He has children to care for too- but did they care? Did they think of anything but themselves?”

His lip quivered with emotion, “We must stick together if we are to survive the years to come.”

Every pair of eyes in the square was fixed on him.

“So this must be an example.”

A quick look back and Justin, Christina, and Melissa were led forward. They struggled fiercely, blood drawn by nails and teeth as the men lifted them onto the boxes.

Heads were fitted through loops of rope slowly, like careful hands threading a needle.

Only then, in their halos of rope, did Azusa realise what was going to happen. He couldn’t even scream, the sound muffled by the contents of his empty stomach surging up his throat as the boxes were kicked out from under his friends.

In a future the Azusa back then could never have imagined, Ruki would tell him that after the first ten seconds they were unconscious.

The jittering was their dying brain sending out one final message.

I let the silence stretch after Azusa finally went quiet.

What was there to say?

He huffed out a shaky breath.

“I found Ruki….Kou, and Yuma, so….”

For a moment, his fangs didn’t seem so large, his pupils not so cat-like. Each hitch in his voice seemed to stretch on for an eternity. It was magnetic, and I was an outsider as I watched my body shuffle closer to him. I wrapped my pale arm around his neck and pulled him closer to me.

“They died… and I… why me?”

“It’s not your fault,” I tried weakly to comfort him, petting his hair. Azusa shuffled closer, rubbing his wet eyes against the crook of my neck. My brain was sending opposing flashes of emotion, making me shake next to him. I couldn’t make myself acknowledge that the Azusa clutching to my shirt was the same one that carved out remembrance for Brielle in my flesh. We fell back onto the bed, him still sobbing weakly.
His eyes look prettier rimmed with red.

“They would be glad you survived,” I insisted again. From the sounds of it Azusa had some nasty friends, but they would be glad for him, at least out of spite- the mean man with clever eyes hadn’t caught them all. And he carried them with him, etched into his skin until his sadness spilled out.

My friends StrikeBrielle Strike had died before. The girl from down the hall in the wardrobe. It was a legend amongst the girls in the clinic, but if the older girls were to be believed, somebody mixed a whole bottle of bleach with a whole bottle of drain cleaner- their parents found them slumped over the bucket in the morning.

But it was different. Other colours tainted the dark blue ache of mourning- emerald envy, sickly yellow doubt. Azusa was just blue. There was nothing sadder than people failing to survive.

Gripping harshly at his skin, Azusa felt for his scars, running his fingers over the smooth ridges left from years of self-mutilation.

“I can’t forget…”

I nodded, only then noticing how quickly I was breathing. Azusa was upset and being upset made people unstable. Being unstable was bad news for any stick girls in the vicinity. Azusa had touched me with cold hands, a scrap for my touch-starved body. Slowly, I backed away, urging my heart to slow down.

He bolted up, the force almost flinging me off the bed. His eyes darted to the kitchen drawers, and he was over there before I could react. The sound of his rummaging competed with the relentless drumming of my heart.

When he turned back to me, the desperate frown was replaced with a relieved smile.

“Help me… to remember…”

“Azusa, I don’t- uh, I never knew them,” I tried desperately to shuffle away from him, drawing my legs up under me. My side started to ache again, pulsing hotly. Everything felt too fast, my brain couldn’t keep up.

Shaking his head, Azusa nimbly flipped the knife in his hand, holding the blade tightly. His pupils dilated when thin streams of red trickled down the sides of his hand, meeting in the middle before dripping onto the floor. The lino had seen more blood in weeks than a surgical theatre.

I looked up at him, mouth open with confusion. What? What on Earth did he want me to do? Was he going to beat me to death with a fucking knife handle, go off the beaten track. The knife was small and light- even with his strength, it would hurt far less than anything he’d done to me before.

“Cut me…..”

What?

His eyes were focused on me like I was the only thing left. The bed and rabbits and paperwork stacked between books faded into nothing.

The two of us, treading water in an ocean of red.

I stood up shakily. Nothing else made sense, so why should this?

“Come into the bathroom. I don’t want to scare the rabbits.”

“Oh, sorry…”
His hand was trembling, barely keeping hold of the knife as he followed me into the bathroom. Already small, it seemed infinitely tiny with the two of us stood together, the back of my knees pressing into the lip of the toilet. Shakily, I pointed towards the tiny shower.

Suddenly, it was hard to form words, “Stand there.”

*What if somebody sees blood dripping down from the ceiling? What if one of the pipes burst and they see blood in the water and link it back to you and you go to jail and what if—*

Cold weight in my hand.

*Of course the handle isn’t warm he’s fucking dead he’s corpse-warm the same temperature as the bathroom scale on the soles of your feet*

Azusa had stepped inside the tiny area, and was shrugging his blazer off onto the floor. Hurriedly, his hands unwound the bandages (I noticed how they were held together with a cute little bat pin, black and chipped around the edges). They piled up on top of the blazer, coiled up,

Dull red and creamy white. Copperhead colours.

He rolled his sleeve up, exposing the blue-white skin of his forearm. White shadows of smaller wounds swarmed around his wrists, but all attention was on the thick, pink line running from his elbow to his hand.

“This is special…” Azusa breathed out, running one finger idly down ‘Justin’, “Us, together…. All of us…”

With the gentle voice of a person trying to lure an especially shy cat into the open, he instructed me.

My hand moved. Not mine.

Azusa remained completely still when the tip of the knife made contact. It wasn’t enough to cut or scratch, but bile came surged up my throat all the same. I couldn’t take it, and making sure not to ruin Azusa’s shoes, I emptied my stomach into the shower drain.

Soothingly, he stroked my straw-hair, wiped the tears from my cheeks.

“It was hard… for me too… at first.”

His eyes were fixed on my hand, which had clutched onto the knife through the whole ordeal.

Repetition. The tip of the knife pressed so gently on his sin it lost contact when my hand trembled. My stomach didn’t flip this time.

“Now, cut.”

I nodded, mouth dry, and applied pressure. His skin was stronger than mine *maybe because he ate enough because he wasn’t fucking human* but eventually it gave. Blood immediately welled up as I traced the original scar, pink skin to black blood. The smell was so rich I gagged again, but his cold hand captured mine before I could draw away. Together, we dragged the knife upwards.

Finally, when no more pink was visible, the knife cluttered to the floor. I stepped backwards, watching with morbid fascination as Azusa slipped his fingers into the newly made cut. His pupils filled his eyes, no pretty pale grey left to be seen.
As soon as my shivering hand grasped the door knob, Azusa’s eyes focused on me. I could see his chest heaving from the thrill of it all.

“Thank you…”

He smiled then, fangs sharp and pearly white compared to the dingy grey tiles. I swallowed, nodded, and tried to speak, but I couldn’t. If I opened my mouth I would cry.

“Let me do something… for you…”

Blood still splattering thickly onto the floor, Azusa stepped past the shower curtain I’d scrubbed mould from when I’d been half a kilogram heavier and half as tired and towards me. His fingers slipped down the entire length of ‘Justin’ weeping more gently now, like mourning a pet that wasn’t yours.

“Open your mouth…”

“Azusa, no, I ca-“

His blood boiled in my mouth. Cold fingers inched past my teeth and onto my tongue. The metallic taste overwhelmed me, freezing me in place. He stepped closer, whispering into my ear like a girl admitting her school crush at a sleepover.

“We taste the same…”

I bit down until my teeth hit tendon, flooding my mouth with more coppery blood. Azusa hissed into my hair, moving forward until I was completely sandwiched between him and the door. Desperately, I let go of his finger and pushed him back as hard as I could. Whether it was purposeful, or the bloodloss had made him careless, he stumbled back into the shower.

Quick. I had to be quick.

The door made a terrific bang when I flung it back, sprinting towards the front door. I tore down the stairs and out into the street. Took a cautionary glance at my window. He wasn’t there, but I had to hurry.

To my right was the park (full of children tearing through the grass, too full, not when I looked like this) and to my left there was a strip of shops that lead into the town centre.

There was blood dribbling down my chin. Even in the watery sunlight I shivered, my ratty pyjamas useless against the winter cold. I didn’t have my money or phone or even a jacket with me, but I couldn’t go back. Not while he was still there.

The doctor’s?

Carried by a gust of wind, Brielle’s voice sang out a warning. Despite the concern in her voice, it was obvious that she found the whole affair hilarious.

"Elita, get real, if you come in like you are now them finding out you haven’t eaten in weeks will be the least of your problems. They’ll get you nice and cosy and slip you something in your orange juice to calm you down as they call your parents. Is that what you want?“

I shook my head, clutching my arms with bloodied hands, “No, no… I don’t.”

For a moment, I saw her shape in every shadow in sight. Wispy hair wound around my feet,
tickling my lanugo.

“Go to the school. There’s that old shed where they used to keep the sports equipment until someone broke in.”

I hesitated. The hair around my shins loosened before drifting away completely. A mother walking her child had stopped dead in her tracks, stepping in front of her son to protect him. She said something my fuzzy brain couldn’t understand.

"Think, El, think and then run."

Mumbling something about being late to the doctor in Japanese so poor I should’ve just kept my mouth shut, I bowed to the woman. Her son peered at me with dark eyes, clutching the bottom of his mother’s trousers.

She tried to voice her concerns, but I was already gone. I slipped down an alley far too dark to consider using on the way to school. A rat, front paws full of mouldy bread, scampered back to its den as I rushed past.

“What if they report me?” I wheezed to myself. My vision was blurring.

Brielle’s whisper back came from inside my head and every crumbling brick in the alley at once.

“You’re losing it El… you really are…”

I didn’t want to think anymore. My heart thudded once, and then silenced as my legs buckled under me.

Chapter End Notes

Hello. I hope you enjoyed the chapter. Honestly I have been debating just deleting this fic for a while, but I’ve decided to finish it. Hopefully I’ll feel better when it's done. This does diverge slightly from canon, but what can you do. Love you all and stay safe.
Last chapter, Azusa opened up about his past, retelling how his three friends Justin, Christina, and Melissa were executed by the townspeople for trying to steal some bread. Azusa then coerces Elita into cutting him. She escapes, and faints from the shock and exertion a little way down the road.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Silk sheets never felt so uncomfortable.

Whoever had dragged me back to, well, wherever I was, was kind enough to keep the lights low. My head was throbbing, the pain turning into a dull ache every time I tried to move my head to look around. So, I stayed on my back, tracing the golden embroidery with my eyes. There was a dull pressure on my arms and legs, like a large cat had settled down for a nap, but I couldn’t make myself look. It didn’t have to be real.

I could dream.

Suddenly, the bed shifted, the ghostly weight of something hardly there tilting the mattress. A puff of air that smelled like old, moth-eaten clothes and something sweet teased my hair, brushing my fringe over my forehead.

“Look at you, El, you’re like those creepy butterfly displays~”

_Brienne_?

“What are you doing here?” I croaked. Another puff of air brushed across my face, making my nose wrinkle. The sweet smell wasn’t something familiar. It was deep, with a hint of…

No. Surely not.

She giggled, “I live in your head, dumbass. I have to bear witness to every bad decision you make.”

I stayed silent.

Another breath.

“You passed out in an alley- good thing nobody called an ambulance, you’d be sent home for sure. Azusa found you and then called the others.”

It smelled like the fox Jean and I found on holiday, curled up in the leaves, most of its face gnawed off with rats and absolutely teeming with maggots.

Weakly, I tried to struggle, but the weight on my limbs wouldn’t shift. It didn’t hurt- I had to be grateful for small blessings.

I needed to calm down, assess the situation. Brienne was only able to talk because I was so unsure. Either my head was sick, and this was its way of keeping me calm, or if she was a ghost, she was
taking advantage of…whatever state I was in. I didn’t know for sure. My eyes slipped shut, and I
did my best to focus on everything else. The sheets were expensive, so I wasn’t at home or in a
hospital, not that any hospitals had canopy beds.

Who did I know? I knew Yui, but she wouldn’t be allowed to take me back to her house (assuming
the Sakamaki’s wouldn’t just kill me on sight, so troublesome was I).

And that left… just the Mukami’s. I hadn’t made friends with anybody else. Although my head
ached in protest when I thought too hard, I tried to remember back. What had I seen of the house
when Azusa had invited me over before?

The sheets didn’t smell of mint or lavender or blood, so I wasn’t in Azusa’s room.

The bed shifted again, and Brienne’s voice, the one that didn’t sound from my own head, seemed
more distant. Even without the footfalls, it was easy to tell she was walking around, inspecting
everything. For once, I was jealous of her.

I bet she weighed less than me too.

My straining ears could tell where in the room she was, if there even was a room. Maybe I’d
properly lost it, and nothing around me was real. I could be curled up in an armchair, playing
draughts with another stick person.

Brienne spoke up, obviously tired of my pointless daydreaming. Even if it was in my head, it was
my reality do deal with. Fucking gross.

“Pretty boring for people so rich. What happened to when people just did dumb shit with their
money,” she chattered to herself, stopping momentarily at the far-left corner from where I was
positioned.

Apparently, my silence wasn’t ab as obvious signal that I didn’t care than I thought.

“She bought that solid gold lama- there’s nothing made o-“

Footsteps in the hallway.

For a second it was completely silent, and I could hear my blood rushing weakly through my ears.
There was one last puff of rot-breath as Brienne wished me good luck, and then nothing. I was
alone.

Unless I always was.

Was it scarier for Brielle to be a ghost, or for her to not be anything at all?

"Jean, stop reading that, it’s just nasty,” Mother warned.

It was Christmas a year ago.

I’d been sent home, stuffed fatter than the turkey, with a food plan held tightly in one hand.
Preoccupied with their presents, the twins were upstairs, trying to figure out exactly what position
their new matching reindeer cuddly toys should take in their beds. Father was asleep in the big
armchair by the fire.

I was still shivering in two jumpers and a thermal shirt

and Jean was reading.
“It’s topical, Mum,” Jean argued, grinning as he put his bookmark in place and put the well-loved book down. The edges of the pages were furry with age, “Here we are, snowed in, no way to contact the outside world.” His voice went deep in an imitation of a Hammer Horror narrator. I smirked.

Sighing, Mother put down her glass (sparkling apple juice- better for the waistline), “Yes, but I think that your father would have a heart attack if he tried to chase the twins around a hedge maze.”

Her eyes flickered to me.

I would die minutes after setting outside, turn into an ice sculpture. Ice was bigger than water- hopefully gallons of frozen blood wouldn’t make me look fat.

“And,” she continued, “This house isn’t haunted.”

“Dad wouldn’t have to be,” he offered helpfully, “Some people develop psychosis. He could think there was a ghost, but it would just be a delusion.”

Mother didn’t respond. Jean picked his book up. I picked at my hospital bracelet.

“Elita?”

The door opened. I knew that soft voice, and despite it all, I calmed down. At least Azusa had some motivation to keep me around, even if it was that he needed a self-harm buddy. The bed shifted, real, tangible, and suddenly my vision was filled with his face. He remained unchanged- I could probably shapeshift into a fucking giraffe right there and he’d just go to tell Ruki I was on a vegan diet.

“I’m here…” Cold dead hand on my cold shoulder, “You fell… We didn’t tell the doctor…. So you’ll be okay.”

A pause, and then a gentle squeeze on my shoulder to make sure I was still listening.

“We gave you medicine… you need to rest now…”

I did my best to ignore the rolling waves of nausea and nodded my head. I wanted to sit up. There were rabbits to be taken care of, and I had an appointment at the therapist’s to not go to. It took a while to think up decent excuses- after all, they’d been dealing with other stick people for years. When I tried to move my arms to support my doll-body, they… didn’t.

They didn’t move.

“Why can’t I move my arms?”

My mouth was almost completely numb. Each movement of my tongue was slow and sluggish, making me sound drunk. What the fuck? I’d passed out before, experienced the aftermath enough to become familiar. Headaches. Dehydration. Not this.

“Azusa, I can’t move my arms.”

It was incredible how quickly the tears in my eyes spilled, leaving trails down my cheeks. I knew all of the risks that came with not eating, that came with not taking meds or taking too many or cutting too deep and bleeding out because you were too scared to go out and tell your parents what you’d done.
Was I paralysed?

My parents were the least of my concerns—there was no way I’d escape if I literally couldn’t move. Azusa would cut me and drink from me and force feed me to keep me fat.

A pig for slaughter.

I cried harder.

“Ruki knows…” Face twisted, trying to find the right words, “You’re like me. He didn’t… it would be bad if you… hurt yourself. We gave you some… medicine… to keep you still…”

Before I was sent to a specialist eating disorder hospice, I spent three weeks in a general psychiatric ward for people aged thirteen to seventeen. Honestly, it was nowhere as scary as what films and shitty online stories read during dull nights made it out to be. The floor was made of thin carpet, underfloor heating keeping the place a little too warm to be comfortable. Other patients regarded me for a moment when I came in (staff checking my bags, taking the drawstrings out of my hoodie and the shoelaces from my boots) before returning to the complicated game of monopoly set out on the table.

It was boring.

Sometimes, when the noises were too loud, or the room-searches actually found the blades hidden in the clear shampoo bottles (it was amazing how powerful that tiny metal detector was) somebody would break. They would howl and scream, chanting until it sounded like an ancient curse. As quickly as the staff tried to cover up the evidence, the craters left by thrashing fists in the walls, accented with smidges of pink blood, left not much up to the imagination.

When that happened, they would hold them down, and make them sleep. Injections only took a second, especially with people as highly trained as the ones on the ward. The rampage would stop, and the offender would be carried back to their bed, dead to the world.

It never happened to me—I was too careful, too cunning, never hid razors in my shampoo.

Seems like they were saving this experience for later.

For once a wave of protectiveness rushed over me for my poor, bird bones, and I cried so hard I could feel my gag reflex going. I couldn’t even reach up to wipe the tears off my cheeks.

“I need to talk to Ruki… it was supposed to…stop.”

Moving silently, Azusa stood, and walked across the room. With one look back (probably to check that I was actually stuck there) he opened the door and left me alone once again. My sobs eventually died out into weak, choked noises and hiccups.

They hadn’t tortured anyone as small as me, that was why he got the dosage wrong. I remembered when my Aunt’s dog had to be put down. The vet, a kind woman with dark eyes and a gentle voice, told us that the first injection was a sedative to keep her calm and stop any more violent movements after the second, lethal, injection was given.

Before she went she twitched, lip curling up into a snarl for a split second before the tears blurred my vision too much to see. My mother assured me she couldn’t feel anything, but the tears fell all the same.

“I’ve really fucked up this time,” I gasped to myself between uneven, shallow breaths. I could feel
my nose running. I wished my mum was there to wipe my face clean, tuck me in properly with my blue rabbit cuddly toy and special blanket.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. I was supposed to die, but not like this. Everything else I’d done, every way I’d abused my body, exercising complete control until I could count my ribs in the low light of my hospital room, was calculated. I was good with numbers. Nothing, nothing in the world could have prepared me for this.

If the Mukamis were regular fucking psychopaths they might just put me down, trace the pale green river slinking down my forearms until more of me was outside my shell than in. But no. They weren’t going to. Deep down I knew they were going to keep me alive.

My mother would call me one, two, three times, annoyed that I couldn’t be on time for this one occasion. Father would calm her down, take everyone somewhere to have lunch while they waited. Then they’d go to my flat under my mother’s insistence that I’d slept in /again/.

The disappointment daughter, the one she only brought up to her friends if they asked specifically after me. Who knows how many worlds she’d weaved where I had left to go to university or get married or volunteer, anything less embarrassing than ‘Oh, Elita likes to be left alone so she can cut herself in the bathroom and not clean up immediately’. I’d ruined every chance of being what I supposed to be.

I was supposed to be a mother, so I stopped eating until my I skipped one, then two, then five periods.

I was supposed to be desired, but I couldn’t bring myself to look in the mirror, or take off my sweatshirts in ballet class.

I was supposed to hate my body, but not like this, not to the point where I couldn’t walk into a clothing shop because the sizes ticked in my head like a time bomb.

My entire existence was an accidental act of defiance. I couldn’t keep up with the fast tempo of the world. Shamefully, I stepped off stage.

\textbf{Never to be seen again}\textbf{.}

At least I’d stopped crying by the time Azusa returned with Ruki. It’d been so long since I’d seen him in school that I’d forgotten how cold his eyes were. To him I was a puppy, still blind from youth, one of his children had brought home and begged to keep.

“How long have you been awake.”

There were no clocks in the room- none that I could see anyway.

“Half an hour?” I guessed, awkwardly swallowing down my saliva.

Humming thoughtfully, Ruki took out his phone. I didn’t dare raise my hopes. He wasn’t stupid enough to call the hospital after literally drugging and kidnapping me.

Azusa squeezed my hand. His grey eyes fixed on mine, but at least he seemed hopeful.

“Ruki-san is calling... who made it for him...”

Oh fucking God.
He was contacting some weird scummy criminal to discuss exactly why the elicit product he’d purchased wasn’t working as promised.

I imagined Ruki walking into a drug den, his brothers sat in the minivan outside, armed with a handbag and the determination of a middle class white woman who’d coupon had been declined to make their lives as inconvenient as possible. He may even ask for the manager.

Hysterically, I giggled, chest heaving from the effort. Ruki frowned at me before finally talking into the phone- I guess even attractive vampires got left hanging sometimes.

“Reiji, there’s a slight issue.”

The giggles stopped abruptly.

Reiji?

Reiji fucking Sakamaki?

Reiji fucking Sakamaki, belonging to the very clan that was holding Yui captive?

They let him make a poison for me? I was of no importance to them, that much was obvious, but how easy would it have been for him to kill me just to piss Ruki off. Even in the school the rivalry between them was obvious.

Finally Ruki stepped out of the room, leaving Azusa and I alone. I took this chance, motioning for him to come closer as best as I could with only my head mobile.

“I need you to look after the rabbits,” I whispered, afraid Ruki would hear and forbid him just to spite me.

After a long, blank look, Azusa nodded. Finally, his fondness of me was something other than an absolute fucking nightmare.

“What do I do…?”

Quickly, I explained what to feed them and how to clean out their litter box. I told him that Gloom liked her ears stroked but Grimm preferred cheek rubs, and that grapes were a special treat, no matter how much they thumped and harrumphed when you put them back into the little, rarely used fridge.

My instructions stopped as soon as Ruki stepped back in, phone slipped back into his blazer pocket.

“Reiji said she should get her mobility back in four to five days- I must’ve given her too much on accident.”

What a fucking snake.

“What should we do…?” Azusa asked. He looked at Ruki with complete faith. It made sense, he’d told me how they’d met at the orphanage after the death of Justin, Christina, and Melissa, and how long ago was that? Two hundred years?

You’d trust anyone if you knew them for that long. Or at least, trust that you knew what they were going to do.

“She can stay here. I have some books on tube feeding, and you can carry her to the bathroom
when she needs to wash and freshen up. She’ll choke if she eats on her own, and she obviously won’t be able to walk over by herself.”

“Should I… get some things for her?”

Ruki shrugged, bored with the situation already, “If you want to. We still need to attend school as not to disappoint Karlheinz.”

Finally addressing me directly, I watched as Ruki stepped forward, eyes boring into me, “I recommend that you stay here when you’re able to walk again. This mansion is big.”

A clear warning. Don’t fuck around. Keep life easy and peaceful. My room was a quarantine zone, but for a minor virus- if I got out there’d be a little trouble, but nothing especially noteworthy.

*People with compromised immune systems, the very young, and the elderly are most vulnerable.*

I wasn’t very young, and even if my body was weary it wasn’t old yet.

But how could I make white blood cells (phagocytes, cytotoxic t-cells, memory b-cells… names buzzed in my memory from a biology lesson long gone) without any protein? How was I still moving with nothing to fuel me?

“I understand.”

“Azusa,” Ruki said, the minute change in tone making all the difference in the world. It wasn’t an order, it was a suggestion, “Why don’t you show her some of your art. It’s a good to take advantage of a captive audience.”

The pun probably tickled him, but it only made the parts of my body I could still move tremble. It was easy to forget how fucked up this all was.

Slowly Azusa nodded before turning to me and squeezing my hand again.

“I’ll be… back soon.”

The pair headed out, closing the door softly behind them.

And I was alone.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone, I hope you enjoyed this chapter. It was a month until my first exam on the 21st, so you probably won't be hearing from me until mid June. I can't believe it's almost been a year since I started this- thank you to everyone who's stuck with me. Be safe, I love you.
The sun swung across the land like a pendulum. Midday melted into dusk, and just as the remaining red impression of the sun was about to disappear beyond the horizon, it began to rise again. The sky brightened until dawn came.

I knew it was a dream because it didn’t hurt to walk. Simple things like that made it easier to distinguish the ever-fainter line between whatever strange reality I was trapped in and the dreams pulsing in my brain.

A park. The showers. Behind the classroom of a school I’d never been to. I could only catch a glimpse before hurtling to a new location.

I could feel the heat of the pulsing sun on the back of my neck. Obviously spawned from pictures in a history textbook, the squat, red-brick buildings were bustling with activity. People called to one another in thick Yorkshire accents, scolding the children who came a bit too close as they chased after one another.

‘Sheffield…’ I murmured to myself uncertainly. It was hard to distinguish between it and Leeds from the low-quality pictures in our textbooks, but I knew. It was my dream after all.

If so, then I was fucking sick of /her/ following me everywhere to gloat. Looking positively radiant in comparison to the men headed for the steel factories (a true illustration of how sick everyone was back then) Brienne skipped out of an open doorway. She didn’t have any teeth.


‘I’ll keep the bed warm for you, El, don’t worry!’

In a flash, the old bus passing through the street was replaced with an elaborate hearse. The door swung open, and Brienne slipped into the coffin it carried without faltering.

Bitch.

I woke up with vomit-mouth, unfathomably frustrated that I couldn’t just reach over and grab the water. I could hear the clink of the ice against the side so clearly in my mind, feel the cold condensation against my fingers as I lifted it to my lips.

The days had flowed by almost uninterrupted, if not for Azusa waking me up after school to feed me or take me to the bathroom. Partially I was grateful for this rest, but hours spent gently wriggling my toes in an attempt to speed up my recovery left me with more time to think than I was comfortable with. I’d always kept busy- Mother insisted that spending all day at school and then all night at rehearsals was ‘good for my character’- leaving me to tumble into bed just before midnight, no time to dwell on whatever dark thing was lying dormant in my brain. A bulb finally pushing out of the earth when spring came, triggered by a classmate calling me ‘podgy’. If being ‘good for my character’ meant ‘developing an eating disorder’, I couldn’t fault her logic.

Staying still was painful for me- how on Earth would I work off the peanut butter and tuna and lavender-grey electrolyte mix that whizzed down the clear tube to defile my stomach if I couldn’t fucking move.

I stopped sobbing after the first five feedings.
My stomach bulged, an evil growing inside of me. Delicate, pure, my intestines weren’t used to such heavy loads, and screamed in protest as they pushed the poison out of me.

Laxatives were added to the tube mix.

Even without the feedings, laying down hurt. When I tried to starve the evils out of me, it took away any muscle or fat that could act as padding. My bones stuck out at awkward angles, like a tree in the process of having its proud branches chopped off, and each joint was covered in bruises. Deep, plum purple faded to swamp green. I looked like a fucking clown after a week trapped there.

Kou came to visit once and took one look at me before finding a lovely new nickname, ‘Twiggy Tina’. God, I wanted to bash his head into a table every time he’d pop his pretty blonde face around the corner and comment on how foul my blood smelled. It was a blessing really, at least he left me alone. Some glint in his sky-blue eye hinted at a maliciousness that was reserved only for the unlucky.

After a horribly real dream where he crushed my sternum under his foot (pink shoes, bird bones, and a metallic taste that persisted for the entire evening) I called for Azusa.

His quick appearance at my bedside was appreciated for once. Both boys were about as well muscled as a limp noodle, so Azusa wouldn’t be much use in a fight, but Kou had a soft spot for his brothers. That was my one bargaining chip. My own existence had no intrinsic value something I’d suspected since I was twelve and stood naked before a mirror, tugging at the soft parts of me but they didn’t want to hurt Azusa.

“Is everything alright…?”

All I could do was smile tiredly (lying- ??? calories per hour) but it was enough. His smile was so soft it was hard to imagine him doing anything to hurt me when his gentle hand closed over mine. For a moment, the last surviving stronghold of my rational brain piped up, urging me to cringe away from the contact.

“Just lonely.”

It was like the clouds parted, revealing Azusa’s perfect, needle-sharp teeth in a smile. The way the bed barely shifted towards him when he sat down beside me made my stomach churn with envy. I bet he was never force fed. Then again, Azusa was a starving orphan in Romania, so it evened out.

Slowly, he shifted, lying down on his back beside me. The gentle smile was still on his face, “Don’t worry… I’m always around… Ruki is letting me take time off…”

The company was appreciated, even if it was Azusa. So much time spent in that room, shadows lengthening until they cloaked the room in darkness, was changing my head. I watched as isolation drilled my skull open and rearranged the lobes of my brain. Yui seemed thousands of miles away, my friends and family hurling away from my orbit on a rocket ship I never received an invitation for. What did Jean look like? Did my mother have blue eyes, or grey? When did my father take his tea?

Thinking about it made me sob helplessly, so I slept instead.

I was always lazy that way.

...

Helpfully, Azusa informed me it was Wednesday.
By then the poison’s effects were largely gone. I marvelled at each tiny movement of my fingers and toes as I bicycled my legs and worked my arms. When Azusa came in with a bowl of soup, he stopped and stared at the manic grin on my face as I lifted each limb and let it thwap back down against the bed.

Smiling also, he walked over, “Ah…you’re feeling better?”

I felt so good I positively beamed at him (weak teeth, dry mouth, the taste of my own mouth overwhelming on the tongue) “Yes! A lot better.”

Carefully, Azusa set the soup down on the table by the bed before perching on the side. His skin was so ghostly pale I swore I could see the bones and their solid presence against his translucent skin.

“It’s tomato… and basil…”

It smelled so, /so/ good. My stomach, stretched from Ruki filling me and emptying me over and over, gurgled greedily. Fingers digging into palms, I obediently lifted my arms and sat up as Azusa shifted the tray onto my lap.

We chatted idly as I ate. Each spoonful was tiny, most returned to the bowl as I sucked up the soup through my teeth. After fifty sips, around a third of the soup, I let my spoon rest and folded my hands over my stomach. I couldn’t take my eyes off of his face, looking for any reaction as he took the tray and put it back on the table.

Nothing. I grinned again. It was a comfortable, familiar feeling, a blanket covered in chloroform.

Silence settled over the room, and I was ready to drift into an uneasy sleep when an ice-cold hand patted my thigh. Eyes flying open, I tucked my legs under me like an octopus, ready to scramble uselessly against the headboard.

“Sorry… I just remembered…” Just Azusa. ‘Just’ meaning that it wasn’t Brienne, or Ruki, or the red head who grinned the grin of a well fed predator at every girl that passed while he waited for Yui outside of our classroom.

“Ruki wants… to see you…”

Well, that ruined my mood.

I couldn’t help but ask why.

A red-hot iron pressed against my skin, the family crest etched onto me forever.

He was still smiling, “It’s about your family… what we will do.”

Immediately, I tried to spring up, Azusa’s steady hands holding me down to the bed. The quick motion made my head spin, and I let myself be pushed back. My heart was rabbit quick.

Slow. Be slow.

So, I was. With Azusa’s help, I got onto my feet. I clutched at his jumper, trying to keep my feet shuffling along. I was elated. I was walking again. My knees popped whenever I extended my legs, but the feeling of soft carpeting and solid oak beneath my feet brought a huge smile to my face. Even the aching pain in my joints (little over a week of force-feeding wouldn’t regrow cartilage) seemed minor to me. Even if I was stuck staring at the fog-cloaked gardens forever, it
was better than being bedridden.

When we reached the library, Azusa let go of my hand, holding open the door for me as I hobbled in. Apparently, this conversation was just for two.

Ruki was sat so still a hopeful thought that he’d kicked the bucket flitted through my head. Had I not stayed the past few days with him, it would be reasonable to assume he hadn’t noticed me. No wrinkle of the nose (Yuuma’s response whenever Azusa took me out into the garden) or derogatory nicknames (I looked like a decent branch at least). He preferred not to call me anything at all, and I was fine with that. The less time Ruki spent thinking about me, the higher the chance I’d manage to leave relatively unscathed.

The desk he sat before was covered in books and paper covered in his cursive writing. Recognising the familiar characters of the Latin alphabet, I couldn’t just keep my damn mouth shut, could I?

“You’re learning French?”

Fuuuuuuuuck.

“Who gave you permission to speak?” He replied coolly, flipping the volume in his hands closed. Having his eyes on me felt like I was dunked into icy water. Was this how the rabbit felt when the familiar, terrifying shadow of a buzzard passed over them?

After a moment, Ruki motioned towards the wooden chair on the other side of the table. I didn’t know I could walk offensively, but my entire brain was focused on the exact way my weight shifted from my heel to the ball of my feet. Could he hear how my heart hammered?

“Calm down,” he said, sounding bored with the entire ordeal, “I’m going to tell you what will happen next.”

I daren’t make a sound.

“Your parents are coming down this coming weekend, are they not?”

A nod.

Carefully, Ruki shifted in his chair, but never took his bored eyes off of me. The message was clear- this was an inconvenience to him, and nothing more.

“Tell me why I should let you see them.”

Ranting about how important this was to me to Azusa and then having him relay the message was one thing; telling him to his perfect poker face was another entirely. Beyond boredom, there was no other emotion, no way of telling what would happen.

“I, uh…” God fucking damnit.

One eyebrow raised. My palms were wet with sweat.

“This has been arranged for a while, and they know where I live. It would be suspicious if I didn’t see them. I’d have to go to the doctor’s office, and then I’d be sent home.”

The smell of old books, the way the chair was just uncomfortable enough to keep me shifting from one side of my bum to the other. God, it was like counselling- some awful, experimental type of counselling that involved paralysing your patients and trying to get them into BDSM.
His eyes bore into me. I wished I could just shield my face with my hands and wait until an hour passed and I could flit back through the waiting room to my grey-faced mother, nothing more discovered and €90 down the drain. Still, I’d leave with the sick, spiteful satisfaction that I was winning.

No way I could win here though.

Slowly, Ruki traced the spine of the largest book before him with his long finger. I held my breath, afraid that the slightest shift in the atmosphere would ruin any chances of me seeing my family again.

He lazily gestured, like a boss explaining to his employee just why he /had/ to let them go, “What if you just disappeared? What would they think of that?”

God, I was going to be sick.

“I... I have siblings. An older brother and two little sisters. I don’t want to make them think I’m dead in a field somewhere.”

“No, no, of course not.”

A ray of hope.

“But... you’re sick, no? Suicidal? Would it be so much of a stretch that you just couldn’t stand your own pathetic life anymore?”

If he wanted an answer he wasn’t going to get one. The horror of that reality slipped through my veins—my family holding a funeral all while I paced around the mansion like a caged animal. A sickly dog, destined to be shot when it became too weak to be of much fun.

I shook my head so hard black spots covered most of Ruki’s smug, perfect face, “No, not that. Please.”

His eyebrow quirked, poker face shattered. Lavishly, enjoying every moment, Ruki pointed at the ground.

“I want you to beg.”

“Really?”

“Do I sound like I’m joking?”

No. No he did not.

Wishing that I’d just died in a horrific plane crash on the way over, I stood up. It was like my first dance recital, or worse, the one where the top of my costume broke and I had to perform the entire thing holding it to my chest.

With the speed of a spider stuck in a glob of glue, I got down onto my knees. I bent over, head on the floor, and tried to disconnect from my body.

“Please, Ruki, please let me see my family. You know how much it hurts to be separated from your family. Don’t do this to me. You’re in control, please let me do this.” I spoke quickly, and in French, hoping that a shred of my pride could escape this absolute torment.

I stared up at him, a rabbit entranced by a hawk, and waited.
It was simple, but all I needed. Ruki nodded.

“I’ll collect you from your flat on Saturday. Don’t forget what will happen if you say anything.”

All of my tension slipped out of me, and I slid to the floor as he stood up. His foot stomped so close to my hand I drew it back under me, protecting it.

“Have we reached an understanding?”

I hated how I could hear the smug satisfaction in his voice. I wish I was strong enough to just smash his head against a table until his brains splattered against the floor.

“…Yes. Thank you.”

Finally, he left me in the room, shaking on the floor.

Dying from the inside out.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, this was a little bit of a filler chapter, but I'm sick and I wanted to get something out this month. Next chapter will be the one I've been planning for over a year- the meeting with the family. I've been struggling a lot recently so I hope everyone is safe and happy.
The stage was set.

Ruki and I stood side by side in complete silence outside of the café, two stone sentries. I thought he’d give me one last warning, one last display of how little power I really had, but he knew I wasn’t completely stupid. The still-healing stab wound on my thigh and Brienne’s smile were enough of a reminder not to pull anything.

The version of me reflected in the café window looked almost healthy. Concealer had done wonders, hiding the nightmare induced dark circles under my eyes as well as the constantly regenerating spots, scattered liberally across my forehead and chin. My chapped lips were disguised by a thick layer of balm, and my eyes looked less yellow when circled by black eyeliner and eyelashes.

Brienne had taught me some of these magic tricks. The key to it, she would say confidently as she plaited my hair, was to create a distraction. The careful thick French plait, teased in all the right places, made it impossible to see my white scalp through the windows where my cells had given up on extravagant wastes of energy like producing hair.

I’d heard the conversation from down the hall. Insisting that my stomach was still too delicate for the grand meals he made for his brothers daily (mouth watering) I’d stayed in my room, door wedged open. Secrets were only comfortable when you were in on them, and the four things in the dining room could out-manipulate me any day of the week.

“You’re going with Twiggy? Why? Her heart can’t handle walking down the hallway, she won’t run.”

A tired sigh, then the sound of a heavy jug being set down, “That’s hardly a concern.”

“Then what is it?”

Yuma snorted, “Kou, Ruki knows how to handle this better than you do.”

Despite the chastising, Kou continued, “And you? As her boyfriend? Times must’ve gotten really.”

“Kou. Enough.”

It was incredible given how much of a loudmouth Kou was that two words from Ruki could shut him down.

As silence filled the air I became painfully aware of my own self- what if they heard my heartbeat that much louder than normal because my head was poking out from behind the door?
Before I could move back, the silence broke, and Azusa voiced his terrible opinion.

“**I like her...**”

“**Ignore Kou. He only goes out with shitty Instagram models.**”

“**Hey!**”

The chat quickly became light hearted, and Ruki finally remembered to close the door. Staying with the Mukamis had only made my paranoia worse, latching onto any odd detail and sinking its teeth in. Were there really any accidents in this house? What I heard or saw, was any of it genuine?

I had to be ready for my family. I had to be better. I had to be sociable and funny and Boh god what if they left me what if they took me back what if Ruki hurt them-B

I pinched the flab on my upper left arm until it bruised and broke and became ugly. Repeat three times for clarity.

Ruki had entered my room the next morning and declared that, while he and Azusa would sit in the corner booth together, listening carefully, he would not ‘accompany’ me as planned. I had no idea whether to be grateful for this or not, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot. Apparently the idea of my frail form being attractive to anyone was so foreign his presence would be suspicious- even if Ruki had the charisma to pull it off.

Much to my annoyance, he was correct.

Even as a girl I hadn’t expressed much interest in boys. My dance classes were girls-only until I was thirteen, and even then I was never caught by the piano teacher fooling around in the prop cupboard with a duet partner. Looking back, the only situations that could even be argued as romantic were with other girls. Fleur, a tall girl with a gap between her two front teeth (now one of the four cygnets in a touring version of ‘The Black Swan’) sat so close to me at lunch our thighs touched. On summer nights when the sky seemed to tear apart from the force of the thunder, she’d knock on my door, clamber into bed with me. This habit continued past the summer storms until the idea of somebody feeling my fat-dimpled thighs disgusted me, and I ignored her knocking on my door. Three months later Fleur was spotted by an agency and left the academy for good.

Did I like girls? Boys? Even before Fleur left my mind was being emptied and stuffed with numbers. Why even think about looking or being looked at at all?

Awkwardly, I picked at the sleeves of Azusa’s jumper. It fit well, and the smell of lavender I now associated with that sad-eyed evil masked the musty smell of abandonment from my nicer, non-baggy clothes. That was a bonus. Really, it was a talisman to remind Ruki who he was doing this for. I held little importance, but Azusa… that was his brother.

“**We’ll be sat in the corner. Don’t look at us.**”

"**I know.**"

Ruki shifted his book from one hand to the other, "**Don't try anything. We can't guarantee the safety of your family if we do.**"

I fucking hated him.

“**...I can hear them. You should go inside.**”
I saw him nod out of the corner of my eye, taking a second to recognise the five figures heading towards us. They stood out like a sore thumb, speaking loudly in French and pointing at the fat calico cat sat in the window of a little boutique.

My heart had crawled so far up my throat I thought I would sick it up.

“Elita?”

“Ellie! Ellie El El!”

The twins (were they always that tall?) rocketed towards me, bearing no mind to how loudly they were shrieking. I only had a moment to prepare myself before Armorelle launched herself at me with absolute confidence that I would be strong enough to catch her.

Skinny arms wrapped tightly around my neck, and for a moment my whole world was the smell of strawberry perfume. Instinctively I clung back, almost toppling over when Adaani grabbed hold of my other side. Now I was protected by an envelope by teenage girls, I let a few tears slip.

Armorelle giggled, elbowing Adaani out of the way before tightening her arms around me. I panicked, scared she’d feel my bones/my fat/my organs, and tried to wriggle free. Alas, she tightened her grip, and lifted me off of my feet.

“I told you I could do it Dad! You owe me…. €50!”

“Hold on! It was me that made the bet, remember? The sweet, sweet prize is mine” Adaani said, poking at first sister’s sides. Unable to protect herself and hold me at the same time, I was unceremoniously dumped back on the ground before Armorelle whirled around, hands-turned-crab-claws ‘snipping’ menacingly.

Father tried his best to sound stern, but couldn’t keep the smile from creeping on his face, “Stop it girls, we’re in the middle of the street.”

“The death match will be held in the hotel this evening,” I added in helpfully, barely dodging second sister’s pokes myself, “Save your ener- ow!”

In her eagerness to escape, Adaani’s foot had stomped down perfectly on my little toe. Yelping, I tried to step out of the way (all the while avoiding the irritated pedestrians passing by) but lost all balance. It would be poetic, in a way, surviving everything else and dying from cracking my head open on the pavement.

Instead of concrete I felt strong arms. With the experience of a woman who’d spent over twenty years wrangling excited children together for family photos, Mother spun me around, letting me fall into her. The fur trim on her coat tickled my nose, but I tucked my head into it anyway.

“Mum,” I said breathlessly, suddenly aching to go home and drag my duvet onto the sofa to watch ‘Fantasia’ with her. My mind was momentarily filled with fairies and dancing mushrooms, free from thoughts of fatty rafts drifting lazily down the rivers of my veins.

“Darling. Oh, Darling, it’s been…”

She kissed me once on each cheek before turning me to face my father and brother, hands digging into my shoulders like talons.

What was she feeling for?
Would she appreciate how clearly she could feel my collar bones arching over the edge of my shoulders?

Was she afraid of letting go?

_The guilt was hard._

No matter how many times Brienne and I would stay up until the early morning writing spiteful lists of every way our parents had failed us (pointless pointless pointless I’d find a way to accelerate my decay no matter what rabbit reborn eating its own young) the look of hope that I’d changed whenever my parents came to visit hurt me more than anything.

_Maybe nobody could help me because I didn’t let them._

No.

_Washing machine - changing room - Christmas dinner_

My thoughts fluttered uselessly around my head, battering against my brain like moths against a lampshade.

Jean made a show of looking me up and down, hand on his chin to stroke an invisible beard. I crouched slightly and held my hands out, welcoming the appraisal.

“Yep, still a goblin.”

“Jean!” My mother exclaimed. I laughed abruptly, letting out a snort when I tried to stop which only made me cackle more. Shakily, like a fawn, I stepped forward into a rough hug.

I sniffed dramatically, “Wow, things really don’t change- you still smell like a sock.”

Jean’s smile seemed to take over his whole face, crinkling his eyes and tinting his cheeks pink, “I aim to please!”

Did I have rosy cheeks? My teeth, were they as straight as my mother’s?

I had rule over a land I didn’t own. Whatever people inhabited this body before me died after the first famine, and now I looked over it from my veranda made of bone.

Watched it rot.

An alien.

I’d forgotten how tall Jean was. When I released him to greet my Father he seemed almost impossibly taller than him. Sons weren’t supposed to be bigger than their fathers, were they? That being said, the twins were only an inch shorter than me at thirteen, and I would’ve been taller than my mother if I didn’t ruin myself.

“You look lovely, Little Duck,” my father said, holding out his hand. I took it and twirled obediently when he lifted my arm up above my head.

“Thank you, Father.”

We just looked at each other. He’d aged an impossible amount- the patch of dark hear at the back of his head had retreated, barely standing its ground just at the nape.
Mother clapped her elegant, manicured hands together.

“So, lead the way Darling. The girls have been talking about a… a ‘rat café’?”

“MuuuuUuUUUUuuum!” Adaani and Armorelle groaned in unison. Father flashed Mother a smile, which she returned.

_They’re happier without you._

_Fuck off._

Motioning the route with my hands, I lead everyone down the road before taking a right onto a smaller side street. Each shop kept plants out by the doors and on the windowsills, and even halfway down the street the smells of the city were overwhelmed by that of pollen and wet soil. About three quarters of the way down, I stopped, and motioned at the shopfront. The sign hanging above the door was shaped like a sleeping Japanese bobtail. Three cats were lazing on the cat tree by the window, tails twitching even in their sleep.

Just about then the twins released a sound like somebody pinching the end of a balloon filled with the souls of the damned.

I just caught my Father whispering to Mother, a playful smile on his face-

“And that is why we don’t have a cat at home.”

Being a weekday, and before the usual lunch hour of the office workers in the city began, the café was quiet. I felt bad for the cats- you could imagine them getting ready for the hectic lunch period by enjoying their space as much as possible. A big black tom glanced at us, evaluated, and then heavily jumped from the sofa to slink into one of the many cat hides that had been built into the walls.

“Let’s sit here!” Armorelle said excitedly, motioning at two plush sofas and a beanbag positioned around a round coffee table, the beanbag positioned across the table from the window facing out onto the street. I glanced over at the waitress for confirmation before sitting down next to Jean. We had to rearrange all of the cat cushions perfectly around us, unearthing a grand total of six cat toys in the process.

I could see the back of Azusa’s maroon beret.

Restaurants had always been difficult. During inpatient I had to prove how much better /fatter/filthier/ I was by going out with my family on the weekends. Entire meals where they’d watch me push food around my plate, hands gripping the tablecloth so hard my nails turned white. It was dinner and a show.

Back then it was hard to imagine anything more uncomfortable than the waitress glancing over at the table, wondering whether I’d eventually get around to eating those four fish fingers I’d promised everyone I was well enough to eat. It was dinner and a show.

Having Ruki and Azusa (a cup of coffee and a carrot and ginger smoothie) sat within eyesight made me shake.

“Been here before?” Jean asked casually, pretending to study the menu so he’d be too busy to study me. Underneath the Japanese, English dish names were printed in small red letters.

“No. I’m in school all night, so I just sleep or get shopping in when it’s daytime,”
The twins looked at me, aghast.

“So you haven’t been to a cat café before?” Armorelle asked, looking at me like I’d gone mad.

“Nope.”

“What about a bunny café? Ooh, or one with owls?” Adaani leaned forward slightly in her seat.

“Wouldn’t it be mean to keep owls as pets?” I countered.

Armorelle, deliberately ignoring Mother’s hard stare, smacked her fist down on the table, “Don’t change the subject!”

I gently nudged Armorelle’s shin with my foot, which in sibling language roughly translates to ‘Stop it Mum is about to lose her shit’.

“I would if they were open after school. I could study some… meowsic.”

Father smiled, “Maybe some… hisstory?”

“I don’t know, I reckon catic design would be their favourite,” Jean added, grinning. Puns and reading about dead people were his two favourite things (in that order too).

Mother seemed to be relaxing a little, and the rest of the table seemed to loosen up a little with her. The shitty puns continued (twins covering their ears and groaning more dramatically each time they witnessed Father and Jean high-fiving over an especially bad one) until the café owner came to take our orders.

Being the only one that spoke Japanese, everyone looked towards me. I recited their orders, pulse quickening at the very mention of such sinful things as a caramel slice.

“And for yourself?” The woman asked, tilting her head slightly so the little bells on her cat earrings let out the faintest jingle.

Fuck.

I forgotten to pick something for myself.

Fuck

Everyone was looking at me cautiously, an animal caught in a snare.

Fuck

It was like my brain had to be rebooted. For a moment my mind was blank and empty, free of useless things like triggers or emotions or how Brienne died alone in her room (don’t think about it).

“Could I have a pot of earl grey tea and a scone please?”

“Of course,” the woman confirmed, scribbling the final order down onto her pad. As she took the menus away I tried to compliment her on her earrings, mention how much they looked like the big tabby cat sprawled across the floor, but my heart was pounding too hard.

All I wanted to do was scream or tear at my own skin or something equally as useless, but I couldn’t. My family were here, and this was all a test. The wool was yanked away from my
parent’s faces, revealing eyes as keen as a hawk’s.

I allowed myself three deep breaths, and then smiled.

“I haven’t had earl grey for so long, I hope it’s as good as I remember.”

“Is it hard to find European stuff here?” Jean asked. I silently thanked him for continuing the conversation without looking at me, without remarking on how all of the blood had rushed into my hands and made them clammy and awkward.

Shrugging, I threw a cat toy in the direction of the tabby, who caught it with a surprising dexterity considering it was completely stretched out, “Not so much, but it’s really expensive. They don’t really sell cheese or milk here- most people are lactose intolerant.” The true nightmare for a Frenchman.

At least Mother had the decency to hold off her comments until after the woman returned, tray laden with traditional Japanese deserts for the rest of the family, and my little scone. It all smelled so heavenly it made me light headed. Maybe, if I just breathed in hard enough, I could taste it without-

*What if you could absorb calories through your nose?*

My obnoxious deep breathing stopped, the whole family looking at me with the concern reserved for those unable to look after themselves.

“Darling-“

“I’m fine.”

I cut Mother off and received no instant scolding, which may have been down to the woman returning with our drinks, or the fact they knew I was about to get a lot less polite very soon.

“Your doctor called and said you haven’t been to the last two appointments,” Father said gently. There was the slightest shake in his hands as he poured himself and Mother tea, “That was part of the deal remember?”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ruki straighten up in his seat. Azusa was surrounded by cats of all colours and sizes, and almost vibrating himself from the rumble of their purring.

Calmly, I poured myself some tea. With the care of a surgeon opening a patient, I cut the scone in half, taking a moment so that the intense warmth and smell of raisins/cinnamon/calories/evil wouldn’t befuddle me.

“Honestly, I slept through them. I didn’t want to say anything because I was worried you’d take me out of the academy, and I have friends there now.”

“Little Duck, we’re not mad at you,” Father began slowly, aware that a single wrong move would absolutely ruin the day and get us banned from the café for good. I could throw a fit when I chose to, “We just want you to be alright. It was a big decision to let you come here, more than that, a big risk.”

“I’ll make an appointment for tomorrow and give you permission to sit in for the weigh in,” I said, stabbing my knife into the little butter packet with much more force than was necessary, “And you’ll see it doesn’t matter that I’ve missed those two appointments because I’m fine.”
It was difficult not to stare at Ruki, who was openly watching me as he sipped on his mug of coffee, probably smug that his force feeding would make the scales read a number so awful I’d burnt it from my memory.

“Elita, we don’t want to invade your privacy or make you uncomfortable—“

“Then why did you bring it up here? In a café as I’m eating. You know this is hard for me so why are you bringing it up.”

Next to get violently mutilated was the jam, and then the scone itself, knife smeared with grease and other foul things.

Father rubbed his temples with his fingers as Mother stepped up to the ring, “It’s hard to believe that since you’re getting so defensive. We only mentioned you’d missed two appointments, never accusing you of doing so on purpose, and you act like a badger in a trap.”

“Could you pass me your phone, Mother?” I asked, hands curled into fists.

“Where’s yours?” She replied.

“Could you please hand me the phone?”

The cold weight in my hand helped to ground me, and I managed to calm myself down a reasonable amount before the receptionist picked up.

“Good afternoon. I’d like to make an appointment please.”

My eyes flickered between my parents as the receptionist checked for availability. It must’ve been in the stars, because a slot at 8am had just become available.

_Maybe they died._

_So?

_Maybe they died like Brienne._

At this point Ruki’s glare was so powerful it was difficult to ignore. Obviously, I’d done something wrong, but in that moment all that mattered was getting my parents to calm down, no, proving them wrong. I’d tanked weigh-ins before, chugging water down until my stomach protruded a dead thing infested with maggots, but this time I wouldn’t have to.

They had no fucking idea how much I’d been eating over the last week.

“It’s at 8am. I’ll meet you in the same place I did today.”

“Elita-“

“I. Am. Fine.” To prove it I lifted up the scone now festooned with butter and jam and took a bite. It tasted so strong and rich and good that I almost gagged from the intensity of it.

Like an angel sent from Jesus Christ, a big white cat with a flat face jumped clumsily from the floor to the arm of Adaani’s chair, causing both girls to squeal and immediately start fussing it. Even with such a flat face you could tell how pleased it was. This apparently closed off the conversation, as Mother didn’t say a word when I handed her phone back.

It was a holiday for the twins. I had to remember not to spoil things for them, like I’d spoiled last
Christmas by doing sit ups in my room all day after eating exactly three quarters of a brussel sprout, or their birthday party, after which Mother had found smears of my cake all around the house until it was apparent I had no more than the tiny bite immediately after it was cut.

Jealous of the attention, two more cats wandered over, one planting itself firmly on my Mother’s lap, and the other one, a lithe young thing, staring down at my brother’s chai latté from its shaky position on his broad shoulders.

The table split into two. The adults talked about history and Father’s work and how all of our cousins were doing, while the twins and I stroked the cats until they purred like engines. Deliberately, I spaced myself between them and that awful corner booth. I’d fucking break their necks before they so much as glanced at my little sisters (probably more appetising than me).

I glanced over at the clock on the wall. It was cat shaped of course, and its tail swung like a pendulum below it. Time passed quickly when surrounded with cats.

“We better get going to Senso Ji,” I said, gently easing the white cat off of Adaani’s lap. It clung on fiercely, claws gripping to her tights like limpets, “There’s a garden and a small museum.”

“Is it far?” Jean asked, finishing the last dregs of his coffee.

I shook my head, stacking all of the plates and cups up onto the tray they’d been brought to us on and covering them with the cat protector. Even through the noise of the café I could hear Azusa murmuring to the cats, shifting them off of his lap and shoulders before sliding out of the booth.

Even with my parents not believing in me (the fact they were right not to was irrelevant) I needed to protect them. I couldn’t let anything happen.

What were four more bodies to the things with a graveyard In their garden.

“Let’s hurry and beat the rush from the schools,” I insisted, fishing around in my pocket and leaving a large tip in the pink jar on the till.

It was hard to focus on the twisting streets of Tokyo with two predators following my family, stalking us like bachelor lions. Suddenly my family was walking slowly, stopping every now and then to take photos or ask what a sign said, and the brothers would stop, look into a shop window, wait for the migration to continue. The scone churned uneasily in my stomach, releasing a wave of irritation. I flexed my fingers and toes, ground my teeth, tried desperately to get them to move faster because my rabbit brain finally had enough sugar to be afraid.

As we neared the Senso Ji garden the crowd thickened, and I could no longer see Ruki and Azusa’s faces when I looked over my shoulder.

“You alright El?” Jean asked, brow furrowed.

He was suddenly by my side, making me jump out of my skin. I flashed a smile (my teeth were about the same shade as my skin) and muttered something about seeing a teacher out in the crowd.

“If they had kids they’d have to send them to the same school,” Jean mused, looking back every now and again to make sure we weren’t losing the others. Each time he turned I cringed. Even if he saw Ruki and Azusa, even if he recognised them from the café, there was no way he could link them back to me. They weren’t in school uniform, and had an odd ageless quality that made them seem both fourteen and forty simultaneously.

“El?”
“Oh, sorry, I was just… just tired,” I said, stepping away from the currents of people. Most were heading to the temple itself, either to pay respects or just admire it. I always found it odd how you never went to see what was close to you. The Eifel Tower was a ten-minute walk away from home, but I only went there once for a school trip. People dreamed about Paris, dreamed about open streets and art and pastries, the sound of people yelling from their market stalls.

I’d been gone for four months and Paris seemed like a hazy dream. It was a world of clouds and soot and silent train rides.

Finally the rest of our family arrived, looking somewhat dazed.

“What did you want to see first?” I asked the twins, deliberately not looking at either of my parents. It was childish, but it was the only defence I had.

“Well,” Adaani began, “Armorelle and me have to go to a gallery for our art class—“

Suddenly both of them were clasping sketchbooks and pencils.

Armorelle took over, “-And do some sketches in the style of the art we see.”

“There won’t be anyone else in the class with drawings like yours,” Mother said fondly. She was always pushy, always wanting us to be different, to be special. It wasn’t surprising—her parents had pushed her the same way.

Maybe if her parents hadn’t treated normal like such a bad thing Aunt Felicite wouldn’t have refused to brush her teeth because of the 'hidden calories' in toothpaste.

“El and I were going to take a walk around the gardens,” Jean interjected, “Why don’t you four go and look at the paintings.”

Father’s lips pressed into a hard line, but since Jean had suggested it he sighed and agreed.

“We’ll meet you in the gallery in twenty minutes,” he said, putting his hand on the small of Mother’s back.

The twins cheered and began to weave their way through the crowd, Mother calling out after them to ‘be careful with those pencils’. I snickered at the thought of Armorelle getting arrested for grievous bodily harm with her sharp little pencil.

Jean and I turned the opposite way, heading down a small path and into the garden. Immediately the rush and bustle of the temple seemed a world away. The sun on the water created shifting patterns on the bark of the willow trees positioned around it, branches making the gentlest rustling sound as the winter breeze rushed through them. A family of tufted ducks squabbled amongst each other, barely turning their heads when he walked past them.

As we rounded a corner I spotted Azusa and Ruki following behind, completely silent on the gravel path.

How much could they hear?

“El, what’s going on?”

I’d been so caught up in my surroundings Jean spooked me for the second time that day. He wasn’t smiling though, no hint of humour when he helped me right myself.
“Nothing, honestly. I know I shouldn’t have gone off, but it-“

“No. Not about the food,” he frowned a frown that said ‘Although that’s another conversation entirely, I know you’re lying about that too’.

A little nervous, I lifted my hands up and shrugged, “You’ll have to be more specific. Sorry.”

Jean looked around himself, and miraculously, the pair were gone. I had no doubt they’d reappear or were just hiding so well my muddled brain couldn’t spot them, which made my heart flutter before going beating a slight bit faster than before.

“You didn’t text or call us for two weeks. I got worried, so I asked a friend to call your landlord and ask if you’d said anything about going away. He said you seemed ill, that you left the flat around two weeks ago and hadn’t come back since.”

Fuck.

Fuckity fuck.

I was frozen solid, petrified. A single wrong word could get Jean or me killed on the spot. Ruki could disguise himself as a snake and strangle, or turn invisible, or bite him with venomous fangs. Really, I had no clue what they could do.

And they could be anywhere.

“Elita, I need you to be honest with me. Is there something going on?”

“No!”

“Bullshit! You haven’t been to the doctor’s in weeks, and I know you’re not stupid enough to get yourself sent back unless something was stopping you from going in the first place.”

“Jean, what could I be involved in?”

Jean scoffed, “Prostitution? Drugs? You always talked about how girls would get addicted to coke or heroin or whatever so they didn’t feel hungry anymore.”

I hissed at him, baring my teeth, “What? You think I’m a fucking druggie?”

He shrugged, “I don’t know Elita, and it doesn’t matter! What matters is that you’re safe, and I don’t think you’re safe here.”

“Look Jean,” I said, suddenly completely exhausted, “I promise it’s okay. I’m tired a lot. I go to school at night and then sleep through the day, which is why I missed my appointments. I lost my phone down the side of the bed and have been too fucking depressed to pick it back up. My landlord just didn’t notice me coming or going, alright? It’s fine. I’m fine.”

Obviously Jean had more to say, but a family of four (smiling and well fed and the picture of normality) who’d just entered the gardens stopped in their tracks, openly watching us. The older woman whispered something to her wife.

“We’ll talk about this more tomorrow.”

Jean and I continued walking, the peace of the garden ruined now. Did ducks usually sound like they were laughing?
“I’ll go to the doctor’s and they’ll say I’m fine.”

“Whatever you say, El.”

It was like being thirteen again. Embarrassingly, tears of rage and indignation and fucking exhaustion pricked in the corner of my eyes.

We both pretended we didn’t notice them until the turning by the lake- the path continued, looping around it until it was back at the entrance, but a branch of it lead through the leafless cherry blossom trees towards the art gallery.

After a few awkward seconds of just standing there, I sniffed and rubbed my eyes hard, smudging my eyeliner horridly.

“Jean, honestly, I’m really tired and really fragile and I just need to go to bed and be with my rabbits.”

Thankfully, he just let out a tired sigh.

“Okay Elita. Be safe. We’ll be seeing you tomorrow, same place and same time as today?”

“Yes. I’ll bring printouts from the doctor.”

I turned to go, but he caught me by my bony wrist and pulled me into a hug.

“We all love you El. That’s why-“

“I know, I know, that’s why nobody believes me,” I said, briefly hugging him back before wriggling out of his grasp.

“Don’t do anything stupid!” He called.

“I’M JUST GOING TO STROKE MY RABBITS!” I yelled back, making sure everyone and everything in the park could hear me.

A rabbit will run down its burrow seeking safety, knowing the snake can follow it but having no other option.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait on this one guys. I really hope you like it and I hope you're all well.
Stay safe <3
It was disconcerting, being back in the flat. Everything was pristine, and the rabbits seemed well fed, but something made my hackles rise. Knowing somebody had been there, touching my things, washing out the stale air I’d taken so long to taint with the smell of sickness, unsettled me deeply. Nothing would be right again.

No. Not now. I had to check on the rabbits- my ownership was a promise to them. Emerging from under the bed like a discount magic trick, Gloom and Grimm loped over to me, standing on their back legs to get a better look at my traitorous face. My knees clicked loudly as I crouched down to get a better look at them in return. The feeling of their fur against my index finger sent goose bumps up my arms.

“You seem okay…” I murmured, giving them a once over. Their water bowl was full and fresh, and their litter had been changed recently.

Ignoring the pain of my pelvis against the hard floor, I sat down, patting my lap. Ears swivelling towards me like satellite dishes, Gloom and Grimm cautiously put their front paws on my legs. Their noses twitched, and after deducing that was safe hadn’t scratched at my arms until my nails were stained red they hopped onto my lap. The curve of their backs seemed to fit perfectly into my hand.

Soulmates.

My head lolled back against the bed. The mattress was lumpy and misshapen, but infinitely more comfortable that the one at the Mukami’s. I still smelled of their body wash, but the mere thought of getting into the shower exhausted me. The mirror guarded the bathroom like a gargoyle, and I couldn’t look at my body after what they’d done. Even sat against the bed I was aware of how my stomach rolled in on itself, the pinch of fat by my underarms.

Overripe fruit. Bloated carcass.

Months, I’d starved for fucking months, and it was all gone. Honestly, I wasn’t surprised. Even talking to the girls in hospital felt like conversing with an alien. We looked identical in our pastel pyjamas to the nurses, marching bleakly from our rooms to the kitchen (meals timed, hair tied back to stop us slathering it with sauce) to the bathroom (talking on the toilet to make sure we weren’t doing anything nasty) but our reasons were that slightest bit different.

Marie resented food because it made her classmates whisper behind her back and ask her out ‘as a dare’.

Camille’s parents left her alone until they found the jars of vomit in her room- then they smothered
her with attention.

Léa didn’t talk about it much. She just didn’t want people to touch her anymore.

And Brienne… I’d forgotten. Things like that seemed trivial when you were surrounded by them. Her reasoning was buried beneath stories of when she slipped down the stairs and chipped her front tooth, or how mad her mother got when she lopped off her hair as a toddler.

As much as I wanted to enjoy the solitude (they could still be watching, I could turn and see a pale face pressed against the window) I was completely exhausted. Too numb to cry anymore, I took off my nice clothes and folded them for tomorrow before crawling into bed.

I tried my best not to dream. The meds that once made my sleeps lands of gruesome colour and grotesque light were flushed down the loo weeks ago, so I was at a loss of what to do. The oak box (untouched- would that offend Brienne?) was still shoved under my bed. Sniffing at my toes, Grimm and Gloom navigated around the mountains and valleys of my body under the bedding until settling in the space between my tucked-up knees and my stomach.

I thought of nice things.

A red dawn.

*The light streaming through the window was completely saturated with colour. Every surface in its path was stained crimson, leaving long, maroon shadows behind them. The table was groaning from the weight of the cheeses and fruit and pastries piled on top of it. I sat up in a body heavier than marble.*

“Hello?”

*No answer. The shower was running, steam thicker than smoke curling out from under the door. That hum though, loud enough to mask the sound of my bare feet on the linoleum, wasn’t coming from the bathroom. It was everywhere. Whenever I moved, tones of it would grow and diminish, like the sound of the ocean against the hull of a ship.*

Suddenly, the shower stopped. Immediately the strange steam stopped seeping into the room. Thousands of flies sheltered from the glaring red light in the shadows of the furniture, clambering over each other and jostling for a more secure position.

*Their movement was hypnotic, and I hardly noticed the bathroom door swing open until it banged loudly against the wall.*

“Hey Eliiiiiiiita~”

Brienne was naked save for the trail of dried vomit streaking from her mouth down to her belly button.

*As if seeing Brienne naked was the most pressing issue, I turned my back to her completely, hands covering my eyes. The hundreds of weeping red slits cut into her body blinked languidly, blue slit pupils rolling until her body looked like an old-fashioned barber pole.*

*The flies continued to hum and rustle, masking whatever sick wet sound I knew the cuts were making because it was my dream damn it mine none of it was real/ of her skin binding together again.*

*I wanted to wake up. Why wouldn’t my body fucking wake up why was it making me live through*
this why wasn’t my brain stopping Brienne from padding across the floor on still-wet feet and picking up the ripest peach I’d ever seen.

Oh god I used to love peaches. On Sundays we’d have them for pudding. Even though I just chewed them up and spit them back into my hand, the flavour still made me think of old Elita. The Elita who could eat a sandwich and not cry, the feast for worms buried in the back garden.

“God, you never listen, do you?”

Brienne’s voice was such I surprise I leapt into the air. Her left hand gripped at my shoulder, turning me around clumsily. Finally, I put my hands down.

Half eaten, the peach dripped tantalisingly, clear nectar running down her arm and dripping onto the floor.

“You’ll be going to die. Do you have any idea how hard it is watching you fuck yourself over? I mean, it was funny for the first few weeks since Josephine, you know, that one counsellor we had, always said you were a good judge of character. Now it’s just sad.”

She continued to eat the peach between sentences, and I continued to salivate. Dyed by the red light, the flesh of the fruit was a deep pink, thousands of times richer than the dull yellow-white years of malnutrition Brienne’s teeth had been stained by. Finally finished, Brienne casually tossed the pit onto the floor. Within seconds, it was coated with a swarming mass of flies, their black bodies blotting out the pretty pinkness of it.

Brienne’s hands were full again. I’d almost forgotten what that oak box looked like.

Her eyes flickered to me, and the smile on her face was sad enough to make me ill.

“Let’s take a look, shall we?”

I was so sweaty when I woke up I knew I’d have to go and shower, even if it meant seeing whatever horrid things had happened to me in the mirror. Gloom and Grimm were stretched out by the wall, the tips of Gloom’s outstretched feet barely scraping the end of Grimm’s whiskers. Their dark eyes flickered open when I got off the bed, kneeling on the cold floor.

A fine layer of dust had coated the top, and the edges had been gnawed by the rabbits, but apart from that it looked just as it was supposed to look.

Hands shaking, I reached out.

don’t want to don’t make me do it oh god

No. Shower first. If I wanted to deal with the box later, then I could.

It was hardly safe, but I kept the bathroom light off and left the door open just a peak. Just light enough to navigate, but my shape was just a shadowy blob in the mirror. The hot water made my head spin, so I turned it off completely and sat on the tiled floor, lethargically rubbing shampoo into my hair. Even the sting of the soapy residue in my eyes wasn’t enough to make me move. The dark couldn’t protect me from feeling every new roll and dimple, every fold and crease where the skin used to be stretched tight over bone like paper over a lantern.

I didn’t want to get out. I didn’t want to know.

*Smash the mirror, idiot, then you won’t be able to see.*
Whirling my head around, I forced myself to stand. Where was she? Where did the voice come from? I cursed the darkness of the bathroom, cursed how my legs shook under my new gargantuan weight.

“Brienne?”

No answer. What did I expect, she was always fucking difficult.

Letting myself shiver, towel-less burn more feel less I turned on the light and looked around once more. The walls weren’t weeping blood, and the mirror hadn’t been written on. The shelf below the mirror was completely empty save for the box stuffed messily with makeup remover wipes and cotton pads.

I lost all concern for the maybe-haunting when I saw myself.

It was like seeing the identical twin your parents kept in the cellar.

My stomach bulged like a balloon, angry purple marks running from my navel to my sides. Even ‘Brienne’ looked strained, the scar tissue pink and visibly stripy from the effort of holding together under the pressure of my enormous gut. The fat hadn’t stayed their either, it had polluted my entire body. I usually kept control of my hair, but despite gaining a fucking monumental amount of weight, my lanugo was completely grown in.

I was a fat, hairy, pathetic bitch.

Maybe I deserved it.

Maybe if I’d been more careful and listened to Brienne I’d be back in Paris, and I’d be fat, but still way fucking thinner than this.

I spoke slowly to myself, eyes squeezed shut so I wouldn’t have to look at the fucking lump in the mirror.

A week. I just had to hold off for a week, and then I could do whatever to the body I owned but didn’t know.

After sitting down on the cold bathroom tiles, waiting for the urge to shatter the mirror and carve out every bit of myself that I hated to pass, I got dressed and made my way down to the doctor’s practice. Every ten steps I’d look around wildly, pulling up my scarf to protect my lower face from the biting cold. The masses of teenagers heading to their regular day-schools didn’t help. I was bumped into and jostled, each time petrified that a familiar cold hand would reach out and pull me into an alley. Finish me off.

Finally, the doctor’s office was in sight. Never before had the clinical white light and clinically fresh smell been more welcome. I shakily signed in before tucking myself into the corner of the waiting room, as far from the door and any windows as possible. There was a pile of glossy magazines with smiling women on the cover, all bright-eyed and white-teethed and unobtainable.

Licking my lips nervously, I grabbed one of the newest copies (all about exercise, a special on work outs suitable for the elderly) and the abandoned biro on the table.

My heart was beating out of my chest.

I opened it to a random page and began to write. Hopefully my Japanese would be decent enough to get the message across.
HELP. KOMORI YUI, 17, BLONDE, 158CM. HELD HOSTAGE. ATTENDS RYOUITEI ACADEMY.

I was on the brink of tears when Dr. Yamamoto called my name.

God, please let somebody find her.

 Barely managing to compose myself on the way into her office, I sat myself down and began my performance.

I was doing fine in school (never attended) and had made some good friends (that poisoned me and made me foul). I’d been taking my meds (the flush of a toilet) and they were working (the sickly-sweet puffs of rot-breath that shocked me awake every morning). Being away from Paris had really helped my self-image (as if 90% of my classmates weren’t thinner and prettier than me over here too).

Overall, I was just grand.

It wasn’t a complete lie though- I really did have to leave early to meet my family. As blatantly suspicious as Doctor Yamamoto was, there was little she could do to stop me. I wondered if she could see how fat I was.

Would anyone ever have my eyes?

With a prescription slip in one hand, and the results from my weigh-in in the other, I had a spring in my step as I walked out of Doctor Yamamoto’s office and into the street. As soon as I stepped out of the practice I saw Ruki. He was stood inconspicuously by the map, murmuring to himself like he was trying to figure out his way home. I froze like a rabbit in the headlights- this obviously wasn’t an coincidence, nothing ever was with him, but we made a deal. He was the one who insisted I didn’t so much glance at him, and here he was, right where I was going to meet my family.

Hopefully inconspicuously, I headed over to the map and stood a few feet away from him, tracing one of the roads with my finger. It was shaking so badly, and obviously this was hilarious, because Ruki was the first to break the silence and chuckle.

“How did the appointment go?”

“What are you doing here?”

He ignored my question, “I bet they were thrilled with your progress. I did give you the perfect balance of electrolytes- medical textbooks really are worth the money.”

I didn’t have much time.

“It’ll be suspicious if I’m late. I need to go. You’re not really looking at the map, so what do you have to tell me?”

“Your family aren’t coming,” he answered simply, finally letting his gaze fall from the map to me, “Come.”

As much as I wanted to stay behind, I followed him. We turned left at the end of the street and then ducked into an alley between a restaurant and a bar. This early in the morning, nobody would be around for hours.

Even though my heart hammered with fear, I turned and spat viciously, “What did you do to
“Pick up your phone for once. Then you would already know,” he shrugged, although there was a twinge of annoyance in his voice.

I kept one eye on him as I pulled my phone out of my pocket and waited for it to turn on. As soon as it did it vibrated violently.

39 missed calls.

What the fuck?

Mother picked up instantly when I called back

“Mum? What’s going on?”

I could faintly hear my dad on the phone in the background, talking about flights and insurance and security.

“After you left we went for a walk around and had dinner. When we came back to the hotel our rooms had been completely destroyed. It was like a damn tornado had hit. Your father’s business laptop is completely gone. We’re lucky we left our passports in the safe.”

Ruki stood just a foot away, staring at me intently. For once his eyes weren’t completely empty, nothing but the sick, smug confidence that there was absolutely nothing I could do.

The phone still in my hands, I thought of a thousand different ways they could hurt my family. I saw Ruki sneaking something into my parent’s coffee, something that would send them to bed with a headache, never to awaken. Or hell, why even go to that much trouble, Yuma could just sneak in at night and batter their skulls in against the wall.

“Your father’s on the phone right now, booking flights back home. His work won’t let him stay over if without all the necessary documents.”

“Are they worried about somebody having access?”

“Well, all his clientele’s information is on there. Darling, I’m so sorry, but it looks like we’re going to have to fly back to Paris tonight.”

Even through the phone, her voice sounded thick with tears.

“Were there any other valuables taken?”

She tried to clear her throat, “Yes. They’ve taken all of my jewellery and perfume, and your brother’s laptop.”

“Fuck,” I hissed through my teeth, shooting a glare over at Ruki, “It sounds like they’re just going to wipe the laptop and sell it. If they were after information on Dad’s clientele, they wouldn’t have taken anything else. They wouldn’t even bother coming to Japan if the firm’s based in France.”

“God, let’s hope so. I’ve never seen your father this stressed.”

I clutched the phone so tightly my knuckles turned white, “You can handle this Mum. I promise it will be okay. They’ll find who did it, and we had insurance right?”

There was silence on the other line for a moment, and when my mother’s voice rang through the
phone again it was fortified. Strong.

She’d always been so strong.

“Yes. Yes, you’re right. I can be upset about it once it’s all over.”

I could hear my father hang up and then call a taxi. If I focused enough, I could see him holding his little book of ‘essential Japanese phrases’.

Ruki motioned with his hand, I had to wrap it up’. My time was almost up, and as much as I wanted to scream down the phone that I needed help, that I needed somebody, I couldn’t hurt them anymore. They had to focus.

“Darling, I’ll have to hang up now. The doctor’s went well, didn’t it?”

“Of course Mum. Be safe, I-“

“I love you too, Ellie.” I could hear her bittersweet smile through the phone. I clung onto the echoes of those words until the line went dead, and the phone was prised from my hands.

Ruki stared me dead in the eye, unflinching, and snapped the SIM card in half.

“What the fuck did you do?” I yelled, aware that people could hear me if they passed by the alley. Oh god, I wanted somebody to pass by the alley.

“Yuma and I just scared them a little, sent them home,” he replied unflinchingly, “I wasn’t comfortable having them around.”

The unfairness of it all made hot tears roll down my cheeks, “But I was good yesterday! I didn’t say anything at all and you /know/ that.”

He turned to walk out of the alley, glancing at me over his shoulder, “Your brother wasn’t. We’ll be at your flat at 7pm to take you home.

“Your house will never be my fucking home,” I screamed, “No matter how much Azusa wants it to be!”

I kicked the wheelie bin beside me, focusing on the pain. I couldn’t do anything stupid. The rabbit decides which way to run from the fox. It was my turn to decide.

I wish I didn’t.

_I wish I never opened that door_

I took the stairs up to my flat two at a time, heart hammering in my chest. Did they have spyware on my laptop? Surely not- they knew I never talked to them anyway. Besides, it was tucked under my bed, hopefully out of sight. I couldn’t assume

*I knew it as soon as I opened the door.*

Something was wrong.

Usually the rabbits would charge at me as soon as the door opened, knowing that my arrival meant food and cuddles. They’d sniff at my shoes, lick my tights (Jean always found it gross when I told him, but I loved it). Obviously they’d been scared, the window was wide open. They could probably hear the dogs-
The window was open.

I never left the window open. I was so paranoid that a bird would fly in and bully them, or that it would get too cold and they’d freeze.

Barely breathing, I tiptoed inside. I checked in the bathroom and on the balcony, inside their hides and the cupboards.

“They always go under the bed, Jesus,” I muttered to myself. I’d been in such a rush to get up that morning I hadn’t made my bed. The hanging duvet obscured my view, so I pulled it back slowly, cooing to them.

///

**Dead house**

Gloom and Grimm were laid flat on the floor, eyes bulging grotesquely.

Letting out a soft scream, I gently nudged them, and then shook them, trying desperately to get them to respond. Finally, I pulled them out from under the bed. They were completely cold, but not stiff yet. I wracked my mind- how long did it take rigor mortis to set in?

A minimum of four hours. I knew it.

Desperately, I tried to think about what I did last night. I fed them their usual vegetable mix, so it wasn’t poison. There was nothing for them to gnaw on, and I only cleaned with animal-safe chemicals. The window wasn’t open long enough to get that cold-

I didn’t open the window.

**I didn’t open the window.**

Gingerly, I lifted up Gloom’s head. It rocked back to a sickening angle.

**Their neck was broken.**

Hands shaking violently, I checked Grimm.

**What could break a rabbit’s neck?**

I vomited into my mouth.

I don’t know how long I spent cradling them in my arms, sobbing until their fur was matted and musty. My head pounded, and my legs were completely dead from kneeling when I finally got up.

I really didn’t have any option, did I?

Nothing was sacred.

I’d never be safe here.

This was as clear a sign as any.

Slamming the window shut and drawing the curtains, I looked wildly around the darkened room. I had to escape.
I could only carry one thing with me and still be able to run. Brienne’s oak box sat unassuming on the floor. On the table was my school bag.

Choices

Chapter End Notes

Killing off the rabbits made me so sad :(.

So I decided to take inspiration from otome game formats in general. There are two endings. Both will be written eventually, but if you all comment which ending you’d like to see first, the one with the most comments will be published first. Stay safe everyone.
Dawn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Still blue, the dawn was only just beginning. If I went outside and peeked through the trees, I’d be able to track the moon’s descent below the horizon, on its way to send whole other populations to sleep. Even with the sleeping pills (had to reassure myself that they weren’t poison every time I took them) I couldn’t sleep through the night. Usually I just curled up somewhere else in the house and waited for my exhaustion to lull me into a second sleep.

But something had pulled me there, to my desk, to the notebook unmarred by my ugly memories.

I hated thinking about it.

I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

“You seem like a quiet one,” I murmured to the book, running a finger down its front, “I wonder what would’ve been written in you if-

somebody else picked you up because I couldn’t because I didn’t make it out if they managed to find me-

It took two minutes of slow breathing before I could blink again, afraid of what images would smear themselves across my vision if I dared blink. I was standing on the edge of a tall building, not wanting to plummet to earth, but unable to tear myself away from the edge.

My hand was tortoise-slow, “I’ll write it down. Is that okay, notebook? Do I have permission?”

Silence.

The first sentence sent bolts of pain shooting down my arm and curling around core. I dropped the pen like a hot coal and stared at what I’d written.

I grabbed my school bag and ran.

It had been three years. I was twenty. It had been three years and I was twenty and I hadn’t seen them since I ran. I could write whatever I wanted in a notebook because they couldn’t know and even if they could I could just rip it up when I was done.

I needed it out of me.

/I couldn’t look back at the rabbit’s or Brienne’s box, I couldn’t see who I’d let down. The shame and rage carried me down the stair two at a time and out of the door, heart already thudding unevenly in my chest.

Forcing myself to calm down, I slowed to a walk and focused hard.

The wait at the bus stop was the longest three minutes and twenty-eight seconds of my life. My foot tapped incessantly at the pavement as I stared up at the electronic board, watching the numbers tick down for the next expected bus. It didn’t matter where it went- I wouldn’t stay on for long.

I flinched when the bus pulled up.
The bus driver looked at me oddly but accepted my money and handed me my ticket. Sliding into the back seat, I slipped my wallet out of my bag and into my pocket before stuffing my bag under the seat in front of me. I was just tucking the straps out of sight when the bus shuddered to a halt, sending me head-first into the seat in front of me.

“Are you alright?”

She was a middle-aged woman, but all I could see was Yui/Azusa/Ruki.

Mumbling something about feeling faint, I nodded, opening the little window slightly. Hopefully my bag carried enough of my scent to I couldn’t look at her for too long without her face changing, muscles shifting under flesh, teeth sharpening into daggers.

The woman rummaged in her bag before pulling out a milk candy, “Here, the sugar will help.”

“Thank you,” I managed a weak smile before standing, eyes scanning the street where the bus was pulling up. It was relatively busy, people neatly weaving around crowds of schoolgirls and bicycles parked in busy groups.

I made a beeline for the nearest clothing shop, resisting the urge to look behind me.

Just like anyone else.

For once, shopping wasn’t difficult. I just grabbed whatever was basic and my size and tucked it over my arm. Amazingly, they still had their summer swimwear out on sale. The bikinis I usually cringed at, that made me curl in on myself so no one could see me, gave me an idea. I payed without trying them on and hurried back into the bustle of people.

There was a gym nearby…

I spotted it. Knowing I looked odd, I did my best to smile at the man behind the counter as I payed for a day pass and a towel to rent.

For once, I didn’t care that they stared at me. No, not at me, at my cuts and at my bones. The pool was so cold it took my breath away- I had to stand in the shallow end, chest heaving as I gasped in air. My rib-cage jutted out grossly every time I inhaled, and for once, I there wasn’t a glimmer of pride in me.

I weakly swam a few laps before pulling myself out of the pool. My legs were weak from the exertion, but I forced myself to the showers. The water was hot and made my head swim until I sat down, clutching my knees as the water pounded against my back and my head.

It was the first time I’d been alone in-Doors opening. Chatter. Swallowing my panic, I got up and gathered my things before locking myself in a stall. The new clothes were comfortable- silver linings did exist. Just as I was about to leave, I remembered the card and passport in my pocket and fished them out. Even the idea of leaving them behind made my mouth go dry with fear. What would I do then?

On the way out to hand my locker key and towel back in, I stuffed my clothes and swimming costume in the bin.

I smiled genuinely at the man as I left.

It was too early to get optimistic, but I was in a better position already. I smelled completely different now, of chlorine and new clothes. As long as I stayed inconspicuous, it would be alright.
The bus stop was only ten minutes away, but it took thirty. I went through every little side street I could, doubling back on myself so I could stay moving with the crowd. Finally, pollution drifting through the sea, the currents pushed me to the bus station. No matter the time it was always busy.

Getting a ticket so close to the departure time was hardly cheap, but I was in no position to wait. Quiet chatter filled the bus, the delighted squeal of a child interrupting occasionally. I watched the man play with his daughter. He counted along his fingers, making a funny face ever time he got to ten.

I counted along.

When the bus finally set off, I rested my head against the back of the seat in front of me and prayed I’d never see Tokyo again.

All I could hear was my own ugly sobbing.

I dropped the pen on the book and held my head in my hands. The fear bubbling inside of me was only a fraction of what I’d felt then, and maybe it was lucky I’d forgotten that feeling.

The room was tinted pink with the sunrise. How long had I been writing? I leaned up, looking out of my window. The back of the house had a garden I’d never bothered to tame- I didn’t consider it my land.

Movement.

Cautiously, ears swivelling like satellite dishes, a wild rabbit hopped out of the thicket and into the slightly shorter grass of my garden. Its tawny brown looked peach-pink in the sun, eyes glinting with intelligence.

Tea. Tea would help.

I’d become crepuscular. I was always awake for the dawn and dusk, but barely managed to make it to afternoon therapy appointments I was so tired. Without flicking the lights on, I made my way to the kitchen. Some feeling had settled in the house, and surely would be chased out by the harsh lights. While the kettle boiled, I prepared the tea.

I never had tea with milk. My therapist called it a ‘bad habit’, didn’t believe me when I insisted I just didn’t like the taste. I had no right to be angry though- I’d spent so long lying.

There was something ritualistic about making tea. I counted to myself, mumbling one minute in French, another in English, and the final in Japanese. Even in the gloom, I could make out all of the faces in the photos on my cork-board, the writing on the milk-candy wrapper. I was still staring when the kettle clicked. Tea in hand, strainer left in the sink to clean out later, I wandered back down the hallway to the living room.

The rabbit was still nibbling on the lawn, now joined by two more of his friends. Standing completely still, I watched and let the tea warm my hands.

There was a reason I had such trouble sleeping the night before.

It was the 28th of September. Three years ago, approximately 98km away from where I stood, Brienne’s parents came upstairs after a suspiciously quiet night. She was cold by then.

Inside my medicine cabinet I’d pinned up little lists of goals. One, written on graph paper snatched from Armorelle’s maths book, just had three names
My parents had offered to get me a cat when I came back, something to look after, but the thought of having another pet just made me want to cry. People forgot- my parents, my therapists, Jean and the twins- but I couldn’t forget them. People always asked how I was able to live on my own, carry on like a regular person (they only saw what I wanted them to) but I had the privilege of surviving. They didn’t.

Either side of the back door were two lavender plants. I’d sit on the stoop in the evening, murmuring to them and watching the bees as they visited each tiny flower. Hopefully they knew how sorry I was, how I never meant to fail them.

Hopefully it didn’t hurt when he-

“Ruki is a cunt,” I announced to the emptiness.

The emptiness agreed.

I gingerly sipped at the tea. It grounded me, anchoring me to the kitchen and the dawn and the rabbits outside. The twinge of stiffness in my side reminded me to go and stretch, refusing to be ignored. Leaving the tea on the counter to cool, I lifted my shirt.

‘Brienne’ (I couldn’t stop calling it that) was a fleshy pink line now, about half an inch thick and shiny with new skin. I couldn’t bend as far on that side anymore, but it wasn’t like I was auditioning for the Royal Ballet anyway.

As I stretched, I tried to recite poems, remember Newton’s laws, draw anything from my memory to preserve the story that ached to be written down and burned. That would only be told once, and I didn’t want to waste it on an empty house.

Bones clicked into place as I stood up fully, grabbing my still-hot cup of tea and heading back to the desk. Golden light fell into the room, but I still shuddered.

It did seem less scary in the dawn though.

I’d taken out cash at the airport and bought a coffee (no milk, no sugar, calorie free) and dropped a piece of paper wrapped in a note in the tip jar. I’d scribbled Yui’s information down with another plea for help. I was a coward for not staying, not finding a way to get her out, but-

I took a deep breath and continued.

The price would’ve usually made me cringe, but I bought the ticket without hesitating, and headed directly to security. It was a miracle that security didn’t stop me- a skeletal werewolf-girl in mismatched clothing and no luggage- but not one I was going to complain about.

Although I was sure the Mukamis could ‘magic’ their way past security if they really wanted to take me back, it made me feel safer. They couldn’t just march in and force me out. Ticket clutched tightly in my hand, I wandered around the terminal until I found a seat tucked away from the crowds and slipping into a much-needed doze.

Nothing else felt right written down. When I arrived in Paris I borrowed €1 and called my parents, who took me directly to the hospital. I didn’t lie- I even told them there were vampires, which I
imagine sent me to a psychiatric ward faster than a cheetah on a speeding bus.

Things were so different when I wasn’t out to deceive those trying to help me. The doctors were no longer lying, pulling up fake numbers on fake graphs about how my fake undernourishment was going to give me digestive problems. I did the worksheets, pinned up the sayings on my mirror, and choked the food down even when I saw a perfect opportunity to slip some into my pockets or a tissue.

I still couldn’t look at a scale. Numbers still ticked in my head when I ate. I was just better at ignoring them now.

Steam was still rising off the tea, swirling gracefully in the air before vanishing altogether.

Brienne didn’t talk to me anymore. Whether the box itself was haunted, or if my stressed brain just wanted a companion on its march towards death, I had no idea. Even in my dreams she’d just look sadly at me, a flash of her face swallowed up by the crowd.

Looking back, I couldn’t tell if she was looking after me, or-

The rattle of the letterbox spooked me, the warm tea sloshing over my hand onto the floor. It was… it was too early for the postman. My little house was out of the way, distant from any village or hamlet, so my post typically came in the early afternoon.

Was it somebody luring me out?

Mug still in hand, I padded down the hall. My hands shook, heart pounding as I clutched the unlikely weapon. If anyone was at the door, let alone who I most feared, I was still weak. Lying alone on the doormat was a single, thick envelope. It had various stamps, and an address in shaky letters. Something about it was achingly familiar, made my heart skip a beat as I picked it up.

I had to get a knife to open it it was sealed so tight.

The sound of my mug thudding against the carpet didn’t even register.

Dear Elita,

I’m sorry if this shocks you. I asked to be the first to contact you, and I only had your new address.

It still feels strange being around people again. Three months ago I was at school and the teacher told me to stay after class. When class was done, he told me they’d come to help me get somewhere safe. They took me to the safe room in the police station to stay overnight, and I’m still in a safe house. I’m even allowed to go for walks with a gentleman with me!

I put my phone number on a note in the letter. Please message me. I was worried when I didn’t see you at all, and the men said your old address belonged to somebody else now.

Although I didn’t find out what I wanted, and I’m sad to leave, I cannot stay in Japan. I’m not safe here, but I don’t know anyone outside of Japan.

I hope everything goes alright.

All of my love,

Komori Yui

PS- I hope my English is okay! I have been practicing :)
I read it once, then three times more, making sure it said what I thought it said. I could barely process anything. My vision blurred, and I gripped the flesh on my thighs until it returned to normal.

It took me twenty minutes to finish the message. My alarm rang out upstairs, demanding attention, but I couldn’t tear myself away until the message was complete. It took a while to remember the different characters, and I had to reinstall the hiragana keyboard, but eventually it was ready.

*Hello Yui, it’s Elita. Come and live with me, in France. I have a house in the countryside. We can get some chickens. I am so happy to know you’re safe. Call me when you get this if you can.*

*Your English is very good :)*

My clock had ran out of battery by the time I managed to press send.

Bright and cold, the sunlight seeped into the house, washing away whatever strange feeling had allowed me to write. Now, the notebook seemed alien to me, like somebody had crept in during the night and left it on the desk for me to find. I knew what I had to do. I pulled some clothes and my walking boots on before near-kicking the back door open. The rabbits raced into the thicket and out of sight, leaving me alone in the garden.

Cold wind whipped around me, plastering my hair against my face. I walked without aim, climbing over the fence that separated my garden from the woodland. Brambles tugged at my clothes but did not slow me on my journey towards some unknown Eden. Deer ears perked up a mile away from me, cautiously moving from the loud, clumsy thing walking through the woods. A sparrow peered at me from the safety of the canopy, singing a song of warning to all listening. I felt spirits reach through the earth, hands made of flowers and thorns gripping at my coat.

I knew the way now. Not long after I’d moved I’d gone exploring and found an old stump, hollowed out by the rain and rot. A magpie fluttered up from the ground, letting out a brash, laughing alarm call. It stayed though, watching as I got to work.

My fingers tore of their own accord, shredding the paper into strips until the only paper in the notebook was fresh and clean. In the hollowed-out stump was a pile of shredded paper, the words barely legible. In the coming spring I’d see strips of it in birds’ nests and the old bedding dragged out of badger sets. The story didn’t belong to me anymore.

With weak legs, I made my way back home. Another cup of tea was needed.

As it brewed, filling the kitchen with a pleasant aroma, I checked my phone.

*One missed call.*

A smile spread across my face as I lifted the phone to my ear, and called back.

Chapter End Notes

*This is the ending everyone deserves. Never let anyone convince you you don't deserve happiness, love, and recovery.*

*The other ending is coming soon. Stay safe everyone.*
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