Yandere!Bishie/Reader Series

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Relationship: Various/Reader
Character: Orihara Izaya, Heiwajima Shizuo, Shiki Haruya, Kadota Kyouhei, Asahina Tsubaki, Asahina Azusa, Asahina Masaomi, Asahina Hikaru (Brothers Conflict), Asahina Iori, Asahina Fuuto, Asahina Natsume, Sebastian Michaelis, Ciel Phantomhive, Alois Trancy, Snake (Kuroshitsuji), Judal | Judar (Magi), Tachibana Makoto, Nanase Haruka, Sesshoumaru (InuYasha), Angelo Lagusa | Avilio Bruno, Kouga (InuYasha), male!Belarus - Character, Sohma Kyousuke, Sohma Yuki, Hisoka (Hunter X Hunter), Illumi Zoldyck, Killua Zoldyck, Soma Asman Kadar, Sakamaki Shuu, Sakamaki Laito, Mukami Yuuma, Makishima Shougo, Joker (Kuroshitsuji), Bakugou Katsuki, Todoroki Shouto, Male!Misa Amane, Asahina Yukiko, Ootori Kyoya, Genos (One-Punch Man), Sonic (One-Punch Man), Haninouzuka Mitsuki, Yagami Light, Alibaba Saluja, Mukami Azusa, Donquixote Doflamingo, Trafalgar D. Water Law, Levi (Shingeki no Kyojin), Kuroro Lucifer | Chrollo Lucifer, Male!Mikan Tsumiki, Kaneki Ken | Sasaki Haise
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by UsernameOK

Summary

Love had a way of bringing the best and the worst out of people. Unfortunately for you, the
best isn't what these boys had in mind.
You stood in the middle of Izaya’s office in Shinjuku, hands stuck in your pockets and silently praying he didn't notice your anxiety.

“Hold on just a second.” Izaya spoke absently as he finished up in the chat room conversation; his fingers flew on the keyboard, eager to close it. He shot you a little smile over his computer. “You know I’m surprised; you barely ever visit anymore.”

“Yeah, it’s been a while.” You gave him a polite half smile. “Sorry to drop in so suddenly.”

For over a year Izaya had become your confidant and adviser; in that span of time, you had told him practically your whole life story, seeking guidance on every problem, his brutal honesty on every tribulation. He had never steered you wrong.

“No, no, a visit from you is nothing short of an honor.” Izaya closed down his computer quickly with a smooth smile. “I was getting worried. The last time we talked, you seemed so down.”

There was a good reason for that. But it was true, for a long time you had sought Izaya’s counsel almost religiously; he seemed to know everything. You considered meeting him a blessing; you could tell him anything, benefit from observations that would be objective and concise. Izaya always lent you a compassionate ear.

“But he’s….”

You clenched your hands tightly in your pockets; you had been hearing more and more unsavory rumors lately, sinister rumors of him working for the Awakusu-kai, Izaya somehow being involved with the alleged human trafficking scandal from Yagiri pharmaceuticals, and much more. It was too much to simply ignore.

“He’s not safe to be around.” You told yourself firmly as Izaya smiled kindly and waited for you to speak. His smile never did quite reached his eyes; when you talked to him you could see his genuine fascination, but lately it had become increasingly apparent it wasn’t for the reason you had been led to believe.

You had the eeriest feeling he was reveling in your need for help, the way you had come to depend on him.

“I just wanted to thank you in person for everything you’ve done for me.”

Izaya laughed lightly. “How sweet. You didn’t have to come all this way for that.” he glanced at the clock. “It’s getting a bit late actually. How about we grab something to eat and I’ll drive you home? Unless, you’d like to stay over?”

At your raised eyebrows, Izaya laughed heartily.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.” he assured you. “I have a spare room you can use for the night.”

“That’s kind, but I’ll be okay. My boyfriend is going to pick me up at the station.” You replied politely, trying to sound casual and not in a huge rush to go. “I actually wanted to say that I probably won’t need your counseling anymore. Things have gotten a lot better since I’ve been taking your advice, and-”
“Boyfriend?”

“Um, yes. We’ve been dating for a couple of months now.”

“I see.”

There was an oddly tense silence that made your palms sweat. Izaya's gaze was trained on you and he didn't look like he was about to speak until you did first.

“Well, I'm very grateful for everything.” You told him at last. “I should be going; thank you again.”

Izaya stood up from his desk. “I heard you had been seeing someone, but I didn’t believe it myself. Here I was thinking he was your friend or something,” he tilted his head quizzically. "I thought you weren’t ready for that?”

“I thought so, but I really like him.” You shrugged and looked at him warily as he came closer and closer.

“Just 'like'? Oh, that's good.” Izaya smiled blandly. “So it won’t be such a big deal that he’ll be breaking up with you.”

“What?”

But Izaya didn't seem to register your discomfort, though you weren't fooled; his voice was light, but icy as he continued. “He’s quite studious, isn’t he? Passing every class, works hard; yeah, he sounds like a nice guy.” Izaya commented pleasantly; he was right in front of you now, hands stuck in his coat pockets. “He wants to become an engineer, right?”

You stepped back. “How do you know that?”

“I do my research. You’ve confided so much in me, I feel like I need to look after you.” Izaya said quietly. “I’m hurt. You’ve been skipping our meetings to see him, haven’t you? Well, that just won't do.”

Izaya pulled out his cellphone and held it up for you to see; you gasped and covered your mouth in horror.

“It’d be a shame if these pictures got leaked to...say, every college in Japan?” Izaya shrugged carelessly. “It certainly would be hard for him, wouldn’t it? It's just amazing what you can do and share online!”

You reached out for the phone, practically lunging, but Izaya put it away and yanked you forward by your outstretched arm. He was almost nose to nose with you, his breath hot on your face.

“Why?” You whispered, still hardly able to believe what was happening, your body recoiling as much as it could from his surprisingly strong grip. “Why are you doing this? What could you possibly-?!”

“Shut up.”

Izaya’s hand was bruising your arm. He held his knife up to your face. You froze and stared at the blade while cold sweat broke out on your skin.

“You don’t even care, do you?” Izaya hissed. “You were fine pouring your heart out to me, using me to feel better, but you only care about yourself. Quid pro quo sweetheart, relationships go both
“Relationship? What the hell are you talking about?” You asked in disbelief, struggling to free your hand.

“I’ve done so much for you, and you’re ready to abandon me, just like that?” Izaya’s reassuring smile was manic. “How selfish. I don’t give out info or advice for free you know.”

Before you could respond, he had flipped you onto the floor.

“You poor thing.” Izaya cooed and brushed back your mussed hair. “I’ve always been there. Is it so much to ask the same from you? You should be here instead of going off to *fuck* with another man!”

You screamed as he slashed at your cheek; a drop of blood slowly dripped down your skin. Izaya stared at it trail down your cheek for a second before leaning in close.

“Please, let me go.” You felt your tears mingle with the blood; Izaya licked up both gently with a satisfied smirk.

“Never again.” Izaya giggled at your horrified expression; he lightly nuzzled your neck. “I’ve got that room all set up for you. I think you’ll be very comfortable here.”

You shook your head weakly, struggling to breath.

“Now, now, don’t be fussy.” Izaya chided. “I love you after all. Aren’t you just lucky? Nothing will ever come between us again, human or monster.”

“Help me!” You sobbed wretchedly through your tears as Izaya dragged the knife blade gingerly down your neck. “Someone, help me, please!”

Izaya gently kissed the red line rising on your skin with a sigh.

“You know, you should love me too.”
“I want a raise.”

“What, no greeting? I just got back and you’re hounding me for money?” Izaya asked as Namie took his package and placed it on the desk; he hung his jacket up on the coat rack with a yawn. “I need to wind down; make me some tea or something.”

Namie continued to stand there with her arms crossed. “You hired me to be your secretary, not your accomplice.”

“Oh please, you’re just supposed to look after her during your shifts.” Izaya dismissed her. “She stays in her room most of the time anyway, right?”

“She tried to escape today.”

“So what?”

“She bit me.”

Izaya doubled over, gasping for breath. “Seriously?! I didn’t think she had that much fight left in her!”

Namie just glared, getting more irritated by the second. “The only way I got her to stop fighting was by threatening to dissect her!” Namie huffed and turned away from Izaya’s smirk. “If I was still head of Yagiri Pharmaceuticals that brat would be six feet deep in a ditch somewhere...or at least what body parts we didn’t use-hey!”

Izaya wasn’t smiling as he held his knife to Namie's throat. “I said use necessary force only.”

"It was necessary."

"If I find out you went overboard and scratched her up, you’ll have wished I turned you over to the authorities.”

Namie stared at him in mild disbelief; he was waiting for a response.

“Whatever. But for every day she makes me work overtime, I want compensation.”

“Sounds fair.” Izaya smiled smoothly as he put away his knife. “You can leave now; make sure you still have the key card to her room. She tried to take mine last time.”

Namie stared after him as he strolled away.

“Screwed up maniac.”

Izaya heard Namie mutter, but his mood was too cheerful to pay her any mind; he smiled broadly and used his key card to unlock your bedroom door.

“Hey there. Miss me?”

No answer; Izaya looked on curiously as you stared at the television. Your mouth was open slightly, eyes glued to the bright screen that lit up the otherwise dim room.
“....age 22, was found lying in front of the National Center for Global Health and Medicine, around 6:13 A.M. this morning. He was reported to have been beaten severely and sustaining several injuries to legs, torso, and cranium....”

Izaya was a bit reluctant to let you have your own TV, but he realized you would get bored cooped up in your room with him being away on business regularly. He was starting to regret his decision as tears began to stream down your face as the news reporter was reciting their lines with a professional coldness.

“...A rumor has spread that this was a crime syndicate related attack, with the method being typical of the suspected Awakusu-kai. No witnesses have been found for questioning. Family members are being contacted and police have begun an investigation-”

“How depressing.” Izaya commented lightly as he sat down next to you on the small couch; he plucked the remote from the armrest. “Lets watch that movie you like, I think it’s coming on in a few minutes.”

Your arms were stiff at your sides as your turned to him; the tears were still falling, though you felt a strange numbness in the midst of your despair.

“Turn that back on.”

“Hm?”

“What did you do? Leak those photos to that gang you work for? Is he dead?” Your voice rose slightly, your shoulders trembling erratically.

“First of all, I don’t work exclusively for them. Second, his ‘activities’ weren’t well received by certain people. It’s not my fault if your boyfriend ended up getting his brains bashed in and splattered all over the-”

“Stop it!”

Izaya frowned slightly as you covered your face in your hands with an angry sob.

“Even after seeing what he did, you’d still defend him?”

“You wouldn’t understand.” You told him with a bitter scoff. It was true, you would never think of the man you were beginning to love the same way after what Izaya had shown you. Still, you couldn’t just forget everything; you couldn’t just forget his smile or just dismiss how happy he had made you. That intention at least, you hoped it was genuine.

“Why?” You asked yourself as Izaya sat back in silence, studying you for your next move.

“Everything was okay; things were better with my family, I was making friends. I was finally happy...”

You tried to keep calm. “Please, Izaya, turn it back on. I need to know-”

“If he’s dead?” Izaya supplied helpfully. “I already told you, I don’t give away information for free.”

“I don’t have any money!” You exclaimed. “You don’t even let me outside-”

“Tell you what,” You cringed as Izaya scooted closer to your side, an arm slung over the back of the couch. His smile was almost convincingly benign. “Give me a kiss, and I’ll turn the TV back on.”
You backed away. “No!”

“Whoa! You must not care that much.” Izaya leaned away with a bemused expression. “Or are you trying to remain pure for when you see him again? That’s refreshingly naive.”

“Whatever he was, he was never as as much of a lowlife as you!” You spat at him, but Izaya wasn’t affected; he just grinned ruefully. “You’re disgusting and I wish it was your head that got smashed into a wall!”

“You know, throwing a tantrum isn’t going to make your situation any better.”

“What is it now? I can’t even go outside!” Your body slumped back against the couch; it was already obvious he couldn’t care less. He had made no secret that your feelings on the ‘situation’ were of little importance. “You ruined everything…”

This made the mask of calm falter slightly.

“Excuse me? Who was the one coming to me nearly every day, begging for my help, for me to give you advice and a shoulder to cry on?” Izaya chuckled. “You poured your heart out to me, and you never even asked me about myself.”

“You never told me anything-!”

“Be quiet. I’m not done.” Izaya ordered softly; his tone immediately made you freeze up as he gripped your chin, forcing you to look him in the eye. “It was due to my influence that you took the steps you needed to give yourself a better life; your little boyfriend—or should I say ex?- got himself killed, so don’t go blaming me.”

“So he is dead…” You felt fresh tears prick the corners of your eyes and a lump swell up in your throat. This only succeeded in pissing Izaya off further; he thought this would be over with once he leaked those photos to Shiki, but here you were still upset over nothing.

“Don’t you dare feel bad for him.” Izaya hissed. “I’m the only one who’s been there. You came to me. Do you think I asked for this?”

Your eyes blinked in confusion and fear, praying he would just let you go; after a second, he shrugged and sighed.

“I suppose it can’t be helped now. Oh, but you don’t look so good.” Izaya released your chin; he got up and sat down on the bed, his whole mood shifted from hostile to concerned. “Lie down, you should rest, you’ve had too much excitement for today.”

“Okay…” You tried to maintain a distance from him; there was only really room for one person on the bed, but Izaya wasn’t having it. He made you lean back against him as he leaned up against the pillows.

“There we go, nice and comfy.” Izaya yawned and rotated his stiff neck. “It’s been a busy day. I heard you bit Namie-chan?”

You nodded silently, feeling Izaya shake with muffled laughter; you wished you could take that knife and stab him in the throat.

“What a day. Ah, I nearly forgot!” Izaya exclaimed and leapt up from the bed. He left the room and came back with a package under his arm, not bothering to lock the door; it wasn’t like you could take him in a fight. “Don’t be shy, open it up.”
You stared down at the brightly wrapped present he placed in your lap. With more than enough apprehension, you slowly tore off the paper and opened the box. It was a dress in your favorite color with matching shoes.

“It’s yours truly’s birthday.” Izaya grinned as you stared down blankly at the clothes; you hadn’t been particularly pleased with any of the other souvenirs or gifts he presented you, but this was different. “I was thinking, let’s go to dinner, spend a night out on the town, take in all this city has to offer!”

Your face held little emotion as Izaya smiled at you deviously, leaning in close enough so his breath tickled your cheek as he played with a bit of your hair. “I’ll let you pick the place we go for dinner, but I think since you don’t have a present for me, it’s only fair I get to decide what we have for dessert.”

“Thanks, but I’d rather stay home.” You pushed the box away and laid down on your side.

“I don’t think I was asking.” Izaya yanked you to a sitting position; you were almost too tired to be afraid, but the burning in his eyes made you rethink your feelings.

“Izaya, please—”

“You wanted to go out right? Well, you’re just going to have to do it on my terms.”

Izaya’s kiss left you breathless in the worst possible way, the hand on the back of your head keeping you from pulling away.

The look on his face was euphoric as he bit your bottom lip. “Now, it’s my birthday and we’re going to spend it together and we’re gonna have a shit ton of fun, alright?”

You nodded dumbly. “Okay…”

“Good.” Izaya clapped his hands together. “Now, go get changed. I made a reservation and if we leave in an hour we should make it in time.”

“Ohay.” You picked up the box and went to the bathroom to get ready; a few months ago, you would’ve put up more of a fight, but what was the point anymore? He’d just get angry and he wouldn’t let you go…he’d never let you go.

“What other choice do I have?”

You looked at yourself in the mirror; your legs buckled seeing the red mark on your bottom lip and you fell to your knees on the tile floor, your body shaking with silent sobs.

Izaya leaned up against the bathroom door and sighed softly.

“She really needs to get over it soon. It’s not gonna be a fun date if she’s on the verge of tears the whole time.” Izaya laid back on the bed with a giggle; still, he thought you were adorable when you cried. It reminded him of when he first met you, how you were so desperate for anyone to care, for someone to depend on.

“She’s just restless; a night out will do us both some good.” Izaya nodded to himself in satisfaction; he got up and began searching through his own clothes for something a bit more formal. He was well aware of his attractiveness, and he figured after showing you what a gentleman he was, you would be that much closer to letting go of your fear and admitting your feelings to him. You just had to stop being so stubborn.
Izaya buttoned up his shirt and smirked at the sound of you starting the shower. It was only a matter of time before you gave in, but what was the harm in helping the process along a bit and giving you a gentle nudge in the right direction? Izaya was feeling absolutely tickled at the prospective opportunities the night may hold; he smiled at his reflection and hugged his arms around himself with barely contained mirth.

“Happy Birthday to me~!”
“Fire! FIRE!!” You screamed as you kicked the thug's shin; he cursed in pain and you ran to the alley way's entrance before he could stab you.

“Help!” You ran head first into someone; you looked up at him with wide, pleading eyes.

“You fucking bitch, get back here!” The attempted rapist brandished a boxcutter at you, glaring before catching Shizuo’s eye; his expression turned to a look of dread.

“Wait, you’re-!”

He was silenced by a punch to the stomach that sent him flying over the street and in a dumpster. A small crowd of people and a police officer surrounded the man; your eyes were fixed on Shizuo's narrowed ones. You heard about him, but had never actually seen him in action; he looked somewhat apprehensive as you gaped up at him.

“Hey, don’t scream okay, I was just-”

“Thank you!”

Shizuo paused; he had mistook your tears for panic, but a grateful smile stretched across your face. He blinked in surprise as you bowed to him.

“Thank you so much, you saved me.” You wiped your eyes quickly. “If you weren’t here…”

“Uh, don’t mention it.” Shizuo averted his eyes nervously; he was not used to being thanked so ardently and he certainly wasn't used to his attempts to help actually working. “Are you okay?”

You nodded and laughed happily despite his awkwardness; the adrenaline was leaving your system and you could feel a huge wave of relief as you smiled up at your savior. You had just escaped a horrible violation and it was all because of this kind stranger. He must not be so bad if he did such a thing for someone he didn't even know.

“Yes, I'm alright. Please, let me thank you for your help.” You insisted. “I was just on my way to eat; can I treat you?”

Shizuo looked down at you strangely. “You should go home and rest or something. Besides, you don’t have to do that for me.”

You shook your head with a warm grin. “I know. I want to.”

The next month was an awkwardly sweet period of courting; you thought your heart would burst when Shizuo fumbled his words the first time he asked you for a real date, and despite his anxiousness, you accepted happily. It was a slow process, but it was more than worth it to be with such a loyal and gentle person. He truly was your hero and you felt you could depend on him for anything. You felt so safe by his side.

On Shizuo’s end, he had received the connection he had always desired. He smiled shyly at your laugh, melted at your praise, and shivered at your touch. As the weeks passed, Shizuo had shed some of his self consciousness and fear; he could still be a bit standoffish and it went without saying he had problems with his temper, but he had never once lashed out at you. He was your constant companion.
Not that this didn’t come with it’s own increasingly worrying set of problems; it seemed lately you couldn’t go anywhere without Shizuo following you. At first it was endearingly cute, but recently it was starting to feel overbearing. Anywhere you went he was hovering around you or looming over you oppressively. Shizuo seemed to think nothing of it himself, but you were starting to feel smothered despite his good intentions.

“Hey, Shizuo?”

You gently took his arm off your waist as you walked down the sidewalk; he looked down at you in confusion. Usually you were so affectionate; come to think of it, Shizuo kept getting the sinking feeling you were drifting off whenever you were with him.

“What’s up?”

“I-

“Give me your money!”

You turned and came face to face with a haggard looking man; he was pointing a knife right between your eyes. You were too shocked to scream as he was sent crashing into the alley he had come from. Shizuo had charged and shoved him into the wall.

“You should never threaten a woman like that.”

Shizuo smirked when the man cried out as he stabbed his lit cigarette out on his cheek; he glanced sideways to make sure you were watching.

“She’s been so distant lately. This is my chance to show her how I feel, what I’m willing to do to make us work.” he smashed his fist into the man’s face, colliding with the force of a hundred bricks; he had never felt so much satisfaction from violence before. “I don’t want to look weak in front of the woman who loves me.”

“Oh my god!” You covered your mouth with your hands; the man howled in pain, his teeth smashed in and his nose hanging halfway off by a bit of skin. Blood ran down his face in streams. Shizuo wasn’t listening to you; he just punched him again. And again, and again, and again-

“Stop it!”

Shizuo’s blows rained down the man’s face over and over in a blind rage; in no time it was reduced to a clump of flesh and slivers of bone. The wall was splattered with blood and all that remained after Shizuo’s attack was a stump where the head used to be; he slowly wiped his bloody knuckles on the man’s shirt. The body leaned against the wall and twitched.

Shizuo turned to you with a smile that was both feral and proud. “I took care of it.”

You doubled over and threw up, almost choking on the vomit that stained your shirt.

“Shit, are you okay?!” he crouched down and rubbed your back gently.

“This can’t be real...how?” You wondered desolately as your vision began to fade. “How could this be the same person?”

Where was the man who just wanted to be left in peace, whose usual demeanor was so mellow and unassuming? You didn’t know who this person looking at you and not caring he had just taken a man’s life. Where was the man you fell in love with?
The last thing you saw was his worried gaze.

You didn’t know how long you had been unconscious when you woke up in your own bed; Shizuo was gazing down at you, running his fingers through your hair. You bolted up and shrieked.

“Hey, hey, it’s alright!” Shizuo took your arms and carefully pushed you back on the bed. “He can’t hurt you, he’s gone now.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” You thrashed around violently but couldn’t break his hold; Shizuo looked as if you had slapped him. You felt hot tears prick your eyes as you looked up at him, begging for this to all just be a nightmare.

“Don’t look at me like that. Don’t cry.” Shizuo whispered roughly, kissing the corners of your eyes. “Please, you can’t be scared of me. You know I’d never lay a finger on you, don’t you? love you. I love you so much.” he laid down next to you, his eyes searching yours desperately. You looked at him trying to figure out what was happening, what was going through his head; it was common knowledge that he couldn’t control his anger, but that level of violence? This was just insanity.

The truth was, you were it for him; the human connection, the love and acceptance he had craved for so long was finally his and he didn’t want to let it go, not when it was finally his. For years he had struggled to accept his power; if having it meant he could keep you with him, than it was more than welcome, even if it meant he’d have to slaughter someone to do it.

“Everything will be okay, you’ll see” Shizuo assured you with a chaste kiss. “I’ll make sure of it; I don’t know what I’d do if anyone tried to take you away…”

You whimpered. “You’re hurting me.”

“Fuck, I’m sorry!” Shizuo quickly loosened his hold at your wince, his normally deep voice rose in panic; he smoothed down your mussed hair with a fretful gaze. “How’s your stomach? Do you need any medicine? I put your clothes in the wash, they should be clean soon.”

You looked down and realized you were only wearing your panties and one of his button down shirts.

“D-did you change me?”

Shizuo mistook your wide eyed gaze for embarrassment and shyness.

“N-no, I’d never-! I mean, I did, but I didn’t look, I mean-shit.” Shizuo sputtered and scowled disparagingly.

“It’s as if it never happened.” You thought as Shizuo averted his eyes in shame, his ears tinged red. “He doesn’t even care he just killed someone.”

“I didn’t do anything. I really want to…” Shizuo cupped your face with a tentative smile; his eyes darkened in affection and restrained lust. “But I also want it to be special; I really think we should wait until our wedding night to make love.”

“He’s never going to let me go.”

The realization hit you full force and you fell limp as Shizuo held you against him; he kissed your temple and buried his face in your hair. You stiffened as one of his hands slowly trailed down to
your bare thigh, caressing it reverently.

“Don’t worry. I promise I’ll be gentle...”
“Come on, dammit!” Togusa cursed under his breath at the traffic, his hands gripping the wheel with white knuckled fury.

Kadota sighed. “It’s either you with your Ruri Hijiribe obsession or these two otakus living in the 2D world giving me a headache. Can’t you guys focus on reality?”

“Hey, don’t lump me in with those lunatics!” Togusa glanced in the rearview mirror as Erika and Walker talked to you excitedly. “Ruri-chan is a real person!”

“Yeah, I know.” Kadota was watching you from his own mirror.

They arrived at the bookstore in less time than expected; you laughed quietly as Togusa made a mad dash for the entrance. Ruri Hijiribe was coming out with her own figurine, and he wanted to get one before anyone else. Erika and Walker ran right out after him, excited for their own purchases; you thought it was funny how they always got multiple copies.

“Kyohei, I’m gonna go in too. Would you mind letting me charge my phone in the van?” You asked.

Kadota nodded. “Sure, have fun. I’m not going in that madhouse.”

You giggled and pecked his cheek sweetly. “Thanks, I’ll make sure they don’t maul anyone.”

You plugged in your phone to the van’s charger and left; Kadota yawned and settled back in his seat. His friends could be such a handful, but you being there was always a big help.

Kadota waited a few minutes before opening your phone; he smiled seeing your wallpaper. It was the two of you holding hands inside Russia Sushi. Erika had snapped the photo with neither of you knowing; Kadota had blushed and scolded her in embarrassment at the tender moment being caught on camera, but you were delighted. He was happy to see it meant so much to you, and his bluster soon deflated into a peaceful smile.

You always made him smile, just by being happy yourself.

With a heavy sigh Kadota began scrolling through your contacts and recent messages.

“Ugh, another call from that guy at her university?” Kadota looked at the number in distaste; the conversation had been nearly an hour long.

“What the hell? What could they be talking about for that long?!”

With a deep frown Kadota blocked the number and deleted your log history; he glanced back at the bookstore entrance before scrolling over to your text messages.

Kadota nearly crushed the phone in his shaking hand. This time another friend you had sent you a flirty text with hearts; didn’t they know you had a boyfriend?

“What kind of shit are they trying to pull?” Kadota seethed as he rapidly deleted the messages. “It’s good she turned him down, but she’s being too nice about it! Doesn’t she know what kind of people are out there? Some guys don’t know when to quit…”

He quickly plugged the phone back in as he saw you walking out the door; Togusa was holding a package lovingly in his arms. Kadota could see Erika whispering to Walker with a sneaky grin, and
they shared a laugh as Togusa kissed the box sweetly. You yourself were carrying a plastic bag.

“What’d you get?” Kadota asked as everyone came in; you handed him the bag with a grin.

“I got you the newest issue of ‘A Certain Magical Index’!” You gave him a chaste kiss. “They came out with it earlier than scheduled.”

“Thanks, you didn’t have to.” Kadota ruffled your hair gently.

Walker clapped his hands together suddenly. “I think we have a new ship!” he turned to you with a grin. “Your sweetness and Dota-chin’s grumpy stoicism is a perfect blend!”

“I don’t know.” Erika said. “I think it’s a bit too fluffy for me. It needs more conflict!!!”

You blinked. “Huh?”

Kadota groaned. “Don’t pay them any attention. They have a bad habit of pairing up real life people we know.”

“Hey, Iza-Iza and Shizu-chan is totally canon.”

Everyone else in the car blanched.

“Oh, that’s weird.” You commented to yourself; Erika looked over your shoulder as you scrolled down your phone.

“What’s up?”

“My text and call history have been deleted.” You frowned slightly. “I don’t think I deleted them…”

“Does your phone do it automatically?” Togusa asked absently, his eyes firmly on the road. You shook your head.

“I don’t think so…there weren’t even that many messages.”

Kadota grunted. “I wouldn’t sweat it, my phone acts up sometimes too.”

“Yeah, I have had this one for a while.” You shrugged and put it away in your jean pocket. “Hey, I got paid today; who wants Russia Sushi?”

“Me!!!” Walker and Erika cheered.


“Thank you Kyohei, you’re such a gentleman.” You smiled warmly; you felt so lucky to have such a good boyfriend. Kadota kept a straight face, but you could see him flush happily at your praise.

“A real man doesn’t make his girlfriend foot the bill.”

“Oooh you’re so manly Dota-chin!” Erika squealed. “Oh god I just had an idea! You, Dota-chin, and Rocchi as an OTP!”

“Yeah, yeah!” Walker exclaimed turning from his manga to your stunned face. “You’re the princess from another dimension and Kadota is your long lost reincarnated knight, but you end up meeting Chikage-san in a shady bar during your part time shift as a detective! You have the power to read minds, which was passed down from generation to generation of-”
“Will you two knock it off?!” Togusa ordered. “I’m trying to drive here!”

You looked back and forth between them. “Rocchi?”

“His name is Chikage Rokujo.” Kadota supplied lowly. “That’s one guy you’re not meeting; he flirts with any woman that moves.”

“Aw, don’t be silly.” You laughed; you heard your phone vibrate. “Oh darn, him again? Honestly.”

“Who is it?” Kadota asked.

“My partner from my night class, he keeps forgetting the due dates for our assignments.” You rolled your eyes lightly and typed a message. Kadota sunk a bit lower in his seat.

“Dammit. That guy better back off if he knows what’s good for him.” Kadota sneaked a glance at you; you looked perfectly at ease. “Can’t she just tell him to ask someone else? Why does he have to bug her every time?! It’s obvious what he’s doing, but she can’t see it!”

Kadota clutched the light novel you had bought him. “I need to keep her safe. I’m not doing anything wrong, she’s needs me to look after her. I’m doing what any good boyfriend would do.”

“Kyohei?” Your voice soothed him somewhat. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, why?” he asked nonchalantly; you shrugged.

“You just look tired I guess.”

“Nah, I’m okay. I had a late job last night.”

Technically it wasn’t a lie; Kadota had searched through all the names on her contacts list, looking for any information on them online.

“Okay. Don’t work too hard.” You told him; Kadota just nodded.

“I love you. I’m keeping you safe.” Kadota thought as he held your hand on the way inside Russia Sushi; you squeezed a bit tighter as you caught his gaze. He squeezed back.

“It’s all for you.”
He didn’t really know you personally, though his opinion of you wasn’t especially high.

You were another silly girl in his junior high school class, skipping around in your own little bubble with your precious family and friends, not a care in the world, except maybe for the upcoming exams and picking out colleges. You didn’t know what it was like to scrape through everyday, desperately trying to just keep your head above water. You had your happy normal life and he had his and they were never meant to cross.

Until that day, that one damn day where Shiki found himself slumped against the school’s back building, breathing harshly, trying to will away the pain from the brutal beating he had gotten from a rival school’s gang. He was still a small fish in a small pond, and he wasn’t going anywhere else anytime soon.

“God dammit.” Shiki sighed heavily as he curled in on himself, his stomach sore and probably already bruised; he felt a trickle of blood drip from his lips. A couple of his teeth were lying somewhere in the grass.

“Shi-kun?”

Shiki looked up sharply, his temper flaring at the childish nickname he had yet to grow out of. He grimaced at your concerned gaze; he didn’t want your pity.

“Don’t call me that.” Shiki spit out some of the blood, watched it splatter on the grass, secretly hoped you were grossed out by it. “Get out of here. This doesn’t concern you.”

You frowned. “That’s pretty big talk for a shrimpy guy like you. You’re a mess.” you pulled out a handkerchief from your skirt pocket. “Here, at least wipe the blood off. If the teachers see you like this, you might get kicked out.”

“What’s it to you? I don’t give a shit about school anyway.”

“What, you’d rather get beat up instead of going to class?” You sounded sarcastic, but the worry was evident in your eyes. Shiki felt his curiosity peak; why did you even care? He took the handkerchief out of politeness and wiped away the blood.

“Thanks. And I’m not shrimpy.”

“Well, you definitely aren’t built to pick fights with five high schoolers.”

Shiki scoffed. “Just wait. Besides, brawn isn’t everything. You need to be sharp to survive in this world, I know that much.”

You looked at him contemplatively and sat down next to him. “I know it’s none of my business, but
you should be more careful. It’s not smart to pick fights with people three times your size.”

Shiki smiled at you slyly. “The bigger they are, the harder they fall. I may have gotten my ass beat, but they didn’t look so good afterward either.”

The bell rang signaling the end of break; you stood up and dusted off your skirt. “Be careful, okay Shi-kun?”

He grunted and glared slightly at the name.

“Aw come on, it sounds cute doesn’t it?” You laughed. “Well...so long.”

Shiki stared as you began to walk away and was puzzled when you suddenly stopped and turned back around. You stood and stared down at him determinedly.

“Look whatever it is you’re doing,” You began uncertainly. “I know we’re not really friends or that close or anything...but if you’d like someone to talk to, you can talk to me if you want…”

Shiki just stared as you bowed and took off; you were blushing in slight embarrassment for your forwardness, your skirt fluttering as you ran to avoid being late to class.

“That was...cute…”

Shiki was disappointed when you ended up going to a different high school than him; he had never worked up the courage to actually approach you again during the rest of junior high, never found the right time or a good reason. You always seemed to be with someone, your friends or acquaintances, or you were busy with your own peaceful life. In the end, he was still just a no name punk; the way things were, he knew it wouldn’t work out.

At least not then.

Fast forward many years later, and Shiki Haruya was a man and one of the most feared in Ikebukuro at that; the Awakusu-kai was his life, he had chosen it, and he had no regrets.

The hotel suite he was staying at was nice, but Shiki hated to be away from his regular lodgings. This business trip was particularly brutal, and he felt a weariness he hadn’t before. Not enough to cause concern, just a friendly reminder that he couldn’t slice up a guys limb as easily as he used to.

“I’m gettin’ old. I gotta leave that kind of stuff to the enforcers. I’m an executive, can’t do those jobs anymore.” Shiki yawned as he entered his apartment; it was on the outskirts of Shinjuku, nice, but not too flashy. He couldn’t afford to draw attention to himself; who knows who might be keeping tabs on him.

“Baby, I’m home. Sorry I’m late, we ran into some last minute trouble.” Shiki chuckled wearily. “Honestly, it’s a sad day when you can’t even go out for dinner without some asshole trying to poison your beer.” he entered the bedroom where you sat reading a book; you looked up like a startled bird as he sat down on the bed.

“It’s a good thing you didn’t come along.” Shiki gently took the book from your hands. “They might have tried to use you as leverage. It’s better if you just stay here, am I right?”

“Yeah.” You nodded; Shiki shrugged off his jacket and threw it carelessly on the ground. He relished the times when he could just relax.

“Come here.” Shiki cradled you to him with a contented sigh. “Hey, would you mind rubbing my
head? I think I got a migraine coming on.”

“Okay.”

Shiki readjusted himself and rested his head on your lap, sighing softly as you ran your fingers through his cropped hair; the worry lines faded a bit from his brow as you massaged his temples.

You tried to keep your fingers from trembling. “I made dinner earlier. I put it in the fridge, but I can heat it up for you in the oven.”

“You’re an angel, you know that?” Shiki took your palm and kissed it. “Sorry I couldn’t make it in time. You miss me?”

“Yeah.”

After a minute of silence, he frowned.

“You don’t sound like it.”

“I-I did.” You cringed inwardly as your voice faltered; you couldn’t help it. Even after months of this you were still frightened; how did this happen? The weedy, slight boy you once knew was long gone and instead was this cunning, cruel man. “I really did.”

Shiki sat up suddenly, an understanding expression crossing his features. “I know what’ll cheer you up,” he got his jacket from the floor, taking a small box out of one of the inside pockets; with a smile he held it out for you to take. “I picked this up for you on the way back.”

You smiled back weakly and opened the velvet box, pulling out a delicate chain. Your birthstone hung from a silver heart charm, the jewel winking in the dim light of the room.

“You like it?”

“It’s beautiful. Thank you.” You smiled slightly and fumbled with the clasp; he would get suspicious if you didn’t put it on right away.

Shiki sat behind you, taking the ends of the necklace and pushing some of your hair out of the way so he could close the clasp. You shivered as he kissed the back of your neck.

You bowed your head slightly. “Thanks.”

Shiki gently held your chin and made you look at him. “You miss me?”

“Yeah.” You nodded quickly; he frowned, the lines deepening on his face. Instead of making him look older, it served to make him look fierce.

“Say it like you actually mean it then!” he hissed; you gasped as Shiki yanked the chain from your neck, breaking the tiny links and throwing it against the floor with a growl. You backed up against the bed post, your arms wrapped around your shoulders, eyes clenched shut. Shiki sat in front of you, prying your arms loose, holding them firmly.

“I know you tried to call your family.”

Your eyes flew open in panic; how did he know?

“I saw the call history.” Shiki frowned disapprovingly. “You think I’m stupid or something?”
You shook your head quickly. “I’m sorry Shiki-san, I-I-”

“Hey,” Shiki cupped your face. “What’s with the formalities?”

He wanted you to use the nickname; he had never had one, not one from a close friend or a girlfriend. He just wanted you to be comfortable around him again and smile and joke like you did that one time.

“Why can’t we just go back?” Shiki asked suddenly; you looked at him in confusion. “I take good care of you, don’t I? Why would you want to leave me, huh?”

You felt tears come to your eyes. “Please Shiki………I just want to go home.”

Shiki’s bark of laughter made you jump.

“Baby, you are home!” he laid back on the pillows and pulled you to his chest. “I wish I could take you out more often, but you know how it is. What if someone from a rival organization saw you? I can’t afford to let something bad happen to you.”

You were the weak one now, the one who wasn’t used to this kind of life. You needed to be protected and Shiki was strong enough to do it now; but you were so distant since he took you in and he couldn’t understand why. You had told him that you’d be there; he had the power and the means to make it so you would never leave his side; he lavished you with gifts and attention whenever he could.

“I’m trying baby.” Shiki petted your head with an exhausted smile; he looked almost sad. “What more do you want from me?”

You stayed silent; there was no talking to him. He wouldn’t listen to you back then and he sure as hell wasn’t now. He had the upper hand, he had the control, and he knew you knew it.

“I’m sorry.” You said quietly. “I’m sorry Shi-kun. I won’t do it again.”

Shiki smiled as you pecked his cheek. “Good. Just in case, I’m gonna have to take away your phone for a while.”

“What?!” You asked feeling dread well up in your chest; voluntary or not, Shiki was the only person you had regular contact with. “How will I-”

“Sh, sh, calm down baby. I’m here.” he hushed you softly, pressing a finger to your lips. “Not for long; I just need to make sure it can only call me from now on, blocked numbers or not, okay?” Shiki assured you, his hand gripping the back of your neck lightly. “Aw, you really did miss me huh? I missed you too.”

Nothing made Shiki more happy than to see you were slowly becoming more and more dependent on him; it was only a matter of time before you accepted this as your life. Maybe he’d let you go out more often; he had to lock the doors and windows. It made him feel bad. He knew you liked fresh air, but he didn’t want to take any chances until he was sure you understood.

“It hasn’t been easy.” Shiki sighed lightly as he made you lean on him; your body was so warm, and sex would’ve been a great stress reliever. His finger tingled from the touch of your trembling lips.

Still, he would never sink so low as to force himself on you, no matter how defenseless and tempting you looked wearing only one of his shirts and the panties he had picked out himself. “I won’t have to make her do anything before long. It’s just a matter of time before she realizes I’m the only one who
can protect her.”

The innocent world you grew up in, the one he resented you for was just an illusion; years of working for the Awakusu-kai taught him that happiness and happy lives could be broken as easily as glass. But he was different now, stronger, smarter, and he would use that to make you understand. He would make sure no harm would come to you, even if it meant he’d have to break you to do it.

You spoke lowly. “Shi-kun...can I go to sleep now? I’m tired.”

“Of course. It was sweet of you to wait up for me though.” Shiki smirked in satisfaction as you rested your head in the crook of his neck; his hands slowly stroked up and down your back, under your shirt. His thumb massaged little circles into your skin, willing you to relax to his touch. Age had made him patient and he knew you’d come around eventually and love him back.

“All in due time.”
“Hey, how’s it going?”

You blushed lightly. “Hello sir, I’m sorry to bother you, but…”

Tsubaki grinned playfully. “There’s no need to be shy. What can I do for you miss?”

“Well…” You said fidgeting with your fingers slightly. “It’s just...I’m a huge fan, and I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to just say I love your voice acting!”

You blushed heavily as he stared down at you in surprise; both of you were standing in the middle of a crowded sidewalk, but neither of you seemed to notice.

“I-I’m sorry, you probably get this all the time, but I just love your voice.” You stuttered. “I loved your role in that space opera anime, it was the first one I ever watched actually.”

“Whoa, seriously?” Tsubaki looked down at you with wide eyes.

You gulped feeling embarrassed. “Yeah. I’m sorry, I’m such a nerd, but I just had to talk to you-”

“Barely anyone likes that show. Hell, that was my most amateur moment ever.” Tsubaki looked mildly embarrassed. “I’ve worked hard to get passed my limitations since then-”

“No, you were amazing!” You said loudly. “Your acting was what made that show, I could tell the other characters were energized by it. I’ve only heard so many voice actors with your level of skill and emotion.”

“Sounds like you’re my number one fan or something.” Tsubaki chuckled at your burned cheeks. “Don’t look like that. I feel honored.”

“I was wondering...would it be alright if I got your autograph?”

“Of course!”

You beamed and riffled through your purse. “Thank you so much, I have a pen and napkin in here somewhere-”

“How about I use your hand?”

You stared wide eyed as Tsubaki uncapped a pen and scrawled out his name and number on your hand.

“I have to get to work now, but how about we meet up sometime this week?” Tsubaki gave you a quick wink before running off. “Don’t lose that number!”

You looked on in silence for a moment before a wide grin spread across your face.

“O-okay! Thank you Asahina-san!”

For the next couple of months you found yourself growing closer and closer to the man who’s voice you had admired for so long. Pretty soon every day began with a good morning text and ended with a message planning for the next time they could hang out, or a flirty good night text.
“She’s so cute.” Tsubaki grinned as you sent him an awkward reply to his kissy face. “Shyness is adorable, but I wish she’d be more comfortable around me.”

He sighed heavily and flopped back on his bed; he wished Azusa was back from his recording session. He wanted to ask his advice.

“Damn.” Tsubaki looked through his phone for the pictures he had taken of you earlier that day; you posed stiffly at the café’s table, a slice of cake barely eaten on your plate. As adorable as you looked to him, he couldn’t help frown.

“She’s my biggest fan, and I think we’re pretty good friends.” Tsubaki groaned. “Why is it so hard for us to be more? What am I doing wrong?!”

Two days later you had invited him over to your house to watch anime; he was beyond excited.

“So this is your place?” Tsubaki looked around eagerly. “It’s cozy. Oh, who’s that handsome guy?”

He pointed to a poster of him and Azusa that was taped to your closet door. You blushed slightly.

“Sorry, is that weird?” You were still getting over the shock of having your favorite voice actor in your own home. Tsubaki was open and friendly, perhaps a bit too much so, and you were still getting used to it all. Frankly, you hadn’t ceased feeling a bit starstruck.

“Not at all.” Tsubaki smiled softly; you looked so sweet, all embarrassed and self conscious. Still, it pained him to see you so on edge.

“Hey.” Tsubaki began; you blinked at his serious tone. It was the first time he hadn’t looked ready to crack a joke or make a teasing comment. “You like me, right?”

“Yes of course!” You blurted. “You’re such a nice person, and I’ve always been a huge fan-”

“I don’t mean it like that.”

You were stung by his harsh tone; Tsubaki looked as if he had been punched.

“Asahina-san-”

“Why is it always ‘Asahina-san’?! Aren’t we closer than that?” Tsubaki rushed forward, seizing you by the shoulders. “I’m so tired of it!”

“I-I…” You had no idea what to say to his sudden outburst. “What’s going on? You’re scaring me…”

“I love you!” Tsubaki whispered harshly; he pulled you into a constricting hug. “Ever since that day we met, I knew you were special. I thought we had a connection.”

You tried to push him away with a panicked stare. “Connection?! We just met!”

“So what?!” Tsubaki demanded an explanation; he couldn’t fathom why you were being so difficult. He was just being honest; you two were meant for each other, any idiot could see that!

“I think you should leave.” You broke free and made a run for your cell phone. “If you don’t I’ll call the cops!”

Tsubaki looked at you, torn between sadness and anger; his voice came out weak. “Why are you doing this to me? I’ve been trying so hard!”
Without much effort, he knocked the phone from your hands, tackling you onto the bed; he was stronger than you guessed. “Tsubaki!” You cried out painfully as he held down your hands. “Please stop!”

“You’re mine.” Tsubaki let go only to hold you to him in a vice grip. “You’re my number one fan, right? I know you feel the same way, you don’t have to hide it silly. I’m your biggest fan too, all this time I’ve been dreaming of you, craving you. You’re all I think about.”

You flinched as Tsubaki kissed your forehead, your cheeks, and your neck, before catching your lips in a demanding kiss. He pulled back with a wide smile.

“Don’t fight this. I love you and I won’t give you a chance to get away.”

You shook violently at his dangerous gaze; you wanted to smack yourself for letting this man know where you lived.

“Let’s watch that anime now, okay? It’ll be our first date!”

Tsubaki laughed carelessly and turned on the TV; you laid frozen on the bed, trying to find some way to escape. He curled up next to you as the anime’s opening began.

“T-Tsubaki, please, let me-”

“Be quiet. It’s starting.” Tsubaki ordered; after a second he turned back to you with a wide grin. “You’re having fun, right?”

You nodded quickly.

“Good. Let’s make this a regular thing.” Tsubaki held you even closer; you could feel his fingers digging into your arms painfully, but you didn’t dare complain.

“O-okay.” You tried to cry silently; Tsubaki buried his face in your hair, one of his hands slowly trailing down to your thigh.

“So cute…”
You bit your lip as Azusa knocked gently on your door. “Come in.”

“Hey.” Azusa smiled softly as he entered your room; he immediately made to sit on the bed next to you.

“Azusa, we need to talk.”

He stopped and his smile faltered. “About what?”

“Why are ten numbers on my contact list blocked?”

“I don’t-”

“Don’t lie to me.” You said sadly; you could barely look at him. “I saw you yesterday after I came back from the bathroom.”

You would never get over the image of what you thought was your sweet, mild boyfriend angrily scrolling through your phone with a glare on his face. When you had made your presence known, he looked normal, but you weren’t fooled.

“I can explain.” Azusa approached you again, but you gave him a glare.

“How? Why would you do that?” Your voice rose. “It seems like lately I can’t do or go anywhere without you demanding to know with who. I can’t so much as text my mom without you hovering over me!”

Azusa’s expression was torn. “Please, just let me-”

“I hate this.” You whispered. “I don’t even know who you are anymore. I’m done Azusa. I just wanted to let you know in person.”

You slowly got up and opened your bedroom door. “Please, just leave.”

Azusa stood there, looking completely lost; he stared down at you, as if unable to comprehend what you were telling him.

“Please.” Azusa surprised you with a tight hug. “You can’t do this, I was only trying to protect you. I love you, I need you.” he stroked your hair and pulled back; tears stung his eyes and you felt your resolve crumble.

“You said you liked how I worried over you.” Azusa pressed. “You told me we’d be together forever. Are you going back on it? Do you really not love me anymore?”

“Stop, that’s not what I said.” You argued weakly. “I just don’t get why you keep monitoring me. I need some space to breath-”

“I’ll give it to you!” Azusa said quickly; he kissed your forehead and brought you closer to his chest. You hadn’t lied; regardless of what he had done, your feelings hadn’t disappeared. His embrace was so comforting and warm, and his voice was so pleading and gentle. You couldn’t bear to push him away.

“Give me another chance, I’ll make it up to you.” Azusa discreetly led you to your bed; he had you
in his lap, peppering your neck and chest with distracting kisses. “Is it really so wrong to be concerned for you? Is it bad to want to make sure you’re still mine?”

“I-I.” You stuttered uncertainly; his touch was making you light headed. “Not again…”

“You promised forever.”

You blinked as Azusa pulled your face down to kiss in a heated kiss; after a minute, he pulled back with a sad and sheepish smile.

“Can’t we just forget about it?”

This wasn’t the first time he had done something like this.

“Okay…”

You couldn’t say no to him; for so long you had been under the impression Azusa was a sensitive, thoughtful young man, someone who wouldn’t harm a fly. Now you were seeing a new side of him, not exactly demanding or pushy; instead, he used sad looks and heartfelt words to get back in your good graces, and you were ashamed to say it worked every time.

“And then he goes right back to watching my every move.” You stared down as Azusa nuzzled your neck lovingly; he knew he had won. He was always especially affectionate afterwards.

“I can’t live without you.” Azusa murmured; it may have sounded like an endearment to anyone else, but to you it was a thinly veiled threat. “You know I need you. You can be so cruel, filling me with so much love and threatening to take it away.”

You sighed quietly. “I love you Azusa.”

“I love you too,” he smiled and held you even tighter; you could almost feel your circulation being cut off. This relationship was suffocating you, but you couldn’t bring yourself to leave it. He had you trapped, feeling immense guilt at the very thought.

Azusa smiled darkly, his face hidden in the crook of your neck; he felt bad at times for his methods, but he didn’t care. If it kept you by his side, he didn’t worry about your conflicting feelings. Besides, he would make you happy, so in the end everything even out.

“I know.”
Hikaru Asahina

“I don’t know about this dress…” You looked at yourself skeptically in the mirror.

Hikaru stood behind you, his hands on your shoulders; a small pout graced his usually mischievous expression.

“You don’t like it?” he asked sulkily. “I picked it out just for you.”

“Oh, no, that’s not it!” You looked at him in the mirror apologetically. “The dress is beautiful; you’ve always had a great sense of style. It’s just…”

“What’s wrong dear? Come on, you know you can tell me anything.” Hikaru prompted with a smile.

You felt your cheeks burn a little. “It’s just, I’ve never worn something so...revealing. The dress is nice, but I don’t think I can really pull it off.”

Hikaru’s smile faltered slightly as you gazed at your own reflection.

You sighed a bit. “You’ve always had this, I don’t know, this confidence about you. You can pull something like this off with no problem, but me? I feel like I’m playing dress up.”

“Hey, look at me.”

You looked up at him quickly; Hikaru rarely spoke without a feminine inflection. The only times he let his natural voice be used was when he was serious.

“It’s true, to pull off a more sexy look, one must have an air of sex appeal, something that says, ‘Yes, I am wearing this and I look damn good in it.’ But not every look is the same.”

“I sort of get what you’re saying.” You replied. “So, I should change?”

“No.” Hikaru said firmly. “You have a beauty that no one else has; it’s yours, and that’s why it’s special. You need to embrace that.” he pulled you against him and leaned his chin on your shoulder.

“You have a look that says ‘cute’ or ‘innocent’, but that has its own type of sex appeal, get it?”

“I see.” You smiled at your reflection; at Hikaru’s encouragement, you couldn’t help see your image in a more positive light. Despite his teasing and somewhat mysterious nature, you could always count on Hikaru to see a new perspective.

“Now, twirl around for me!” Hikaru clapped. “Come on, show me that charming smile, huh?”

You giggled and spun around, the dress fluttering around your knees; Hikaru smiled softly as you looked yourself over in the mirror with an almost shy air of satisfaction.

“I’m happy I can make you feel this way.” Hikaru thought as you slipped on the matching shoes he brought to complete the ensemble. He loved picking out clothes for you, knowing you would wear them and think of him as you went about your day. Besides, you looked just like a darling doll; in his opinion, it was you that made the dresses lovely, not the other way around.

“I’m glad I’m the only one who can make you feel beautiful.” Hikaru felt his spirits darken at his thoughts. “I just wish you felt the same.”

“Thank you Hikaru-san, I feel much better about it.” You beamed up at him and modeled your new
shoes. “You’re so pretty and fashionable, I’m jealous. You’re more of a woman than me—oh god.”
You looked mortified. “That was dumb, I hope I didn’t offend you.”

Hikaru turned away from you. “As a matter of fact, I am.”

“Hikaru-san, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean it like it sounded. I understand that—”

“No, you don’t understand.” Hikaru smiled ruefully. “I’m not even that dressed up today, but it
seems no matter how I look, you don’t see me as a man.”

You frowned sadly feeling a bit confused still. “I’m sorry. You have to believe me, I didn’t mean it
in an offensive way. I thought you were fine identifying as a woman, I wasn’t trying to mock you.”

Hikaru suddenly grabbed the wet towel he had used to clean your face before applying your make
up to go with the dress. You stared worriedly as he used it to furiously wipe away his perfectly
applied make up; when he was done, he threw the towel to the floor with a huff.

“You’re missing the point entirely.” Hikaru walked toward you slowly. “I’m sick of you seeing me
as your gal pal. It’s true, I’m fine that you know me as a woman, but that doesn’t mean I want you to
forget—”

He grabbed your chin firmly, his eyes piercing through you with a fire you had never seen before.

“I am still a man.”

You gasped as Hikaru drew your face closer to his with a tiny smirk. “It’s high time you started
seeing me as such.”

You felt your knees buckle at his kiss; you nearly lost yourself before he pulled away, torn between a
tingling in your lips and the scared beating of your heart at his dark gaze.

“Do you see me now? Do you?” Hikaru’s smile was wicked at your flushed cheeks. “You really do
look just adorable in that outfit. Maybe I’ll pick out your whole wardrobe from now on; we can play
dress up everyday if you like.”

“Hikaru-san, you’re scaring me.” You said softly; you were still trying to wrap your head around
what had just happened.

“Now, now, there’s nothing to be scared of.” Hikaru ran his hands through your hair, backing you
against the mirror; he smiled seeing your bodies so close, your face so flushed and uncertain. “You
said I always make you feel better, right? I’ll always be there to do just that.”

You stared at him wide eyed as he stroked your cheek; his touch was gentle, yet firm. There was an
unspoken, but very unambiguous message. You were his.

“My lovely doll.”
A long time ago Natsume decided that rainy Sunday mornings were the best, especially when he was warm and waking up under the covers, the rain noisily pelting on the glass window panes, the sun had yet to come out and shine it's blinding rays on his tired eyes.

But the absolutely best part of it was being able to enjoy the lazy, peaceful morning with you.

“Good morning babe.” Natsume mumbled sleepily, turning over and struggling to free his arm from the blankets so he could throw it over your body.

But you weren't there.

Natsume bolted out of bed; your side was still warm, so you couldn't have been gone for long.

“Babe?” Natsume called out as he buttoned up a random shirt and practically jumped into his pants. He rushed to look in the kitchen, the living room, the shower, but you weren't there.

A second later he had slipped on his shoes and was driving through the street, scanning the sidewalks and small crowds.

There were only so many people out, and within maybe twenty minutes he spotted you through his soaked windshield, your feet stomping through the water as you ran. Natsume waited until you were about to cross into the park and pulled over on the side of the street, the tires screeching against the wet pavement.

“Hey!”

You gasped as Natsume came running after you; you froze and found yourself backed against a tree, clothes and hair weighed down from the rain water. You were so tired; he had found you again.

“Are you crazy?” Natsume panted; his haphazardly thrown on clothes were drenched and his voice more worried than angry. “You shouldn’t be going out for runs in this kind of weather, you’ll catch a cold.”

You simply stared at him; the water was chilling you to the bone, but the shiver that went through your body wasn’t from the cold.

“He doesn’t get it. Natsume, why?” You wondered for what must have been the hundredth time since you came to live with him. You remembered how grateful, how delighted you were when he had first presented you with a key to his apartment, the serious, yet shy expression on his face as you slowly took it with a warm blush. You had been so happy.

Natsume took your hand in his. “Let’s get to the car. I have a spare jacket in the back you can wear until we get home.”

You just nodded, a lump rising up in your throat. “He’s always been prepared.”

The way his hand was wrapped around yours so warmly reminded you of how it used to be when you first started seeing each other. Natsume was a bit stern in nature, but his kindness and maturity won you over. You could always depend on him for advice or help. You thought you were the luckiest woman in the world.
“Your skin is freezing.” Natsume said, hand gripped on the steering wheel as he drove, his other still intertwined with your limp hand. At a red light, he raised your fingers to his lips and blew on them. “You shouldn’t be so reckless, worrying me like that.”

“I’m sorry…” You didn’t know what else to say; how could he be so normal?

“It’s okay.” Natsume said; he glanced at you from the corner of his eyes. “Just don’t do it again.”

You refrained a whimper from his suddenly bruising grip.

“I worry so much about you….” Natsume trailed off distractedly as he kept his eyes on the road.

You kept your eyes lowered to the ground as he walked you to the apartment entrance and in the elevator; you looked up at him briefly as you found yourself in the threshold of your ‘home’.

“You want to take a hot shower together?” Natsume offered with a slight smile. “I think we can find a way to get you warmed up.”

You smiled back hesitantly. “I’ll just dry my hair and go back to bed.”

Natsume’s smile fell into an expression of disappointment; you were one of the few people who saw more than his normally stern expression. You used to feel so lucky for that too.

“You used to love us taking showers together.”

“I’m just really tired.”

“I’ll come to bed with you then.”

“It’s fine, you can go take a shower if you want.”

Natsume’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you being like this?”

“Like what?” You tried to look innocent and exhausted; usually that was enough to get him to back off. Today was an exception.

“You haven’t touched me in months.” Natsume pulled you close. “No kisses, no hugs, nothing. I can see it all over your face…you can’t even stand to be in the same room with me half the time…”

“T-that’s not true!” You told him. 

“If I take a shower now, you’ll try to run away again.”

“No!” You insisted; you began pulling him toward the bedroom. “I-I just want to cuddle with you. I really am tired Natsume, honestly.” You looked up at him with pleading eyes.

“Really?” Natsume’s smile was so beautiful; you wanted to cry.

“How did this happen? Why did I let it go this far?” You asked yourself as Natsume held you close after you had both toweled off; his embrace used to make you feel so warm, so safe. Now it was like you were bound in iron chains.

No matter what you did, he just wouldn’t let you go. Your calls and texts were monitored, you were seldom allowed outside, and he even demanded you wear a fake wedding ring whenever you did go out. You didn’t question it. Natsume was so mature and experienced after all; in the beginning you gullibly took him for his word, never even thinking of the possibly selfish intentions behind every
excuse and reassurance.

“I’m just trying to look out for you.”

“I don’t want you share you with anyone.”

“Don’t you love me?”

“I want to keep you close.”

“I love you.” Natsume kissed your cheek and ruffled your hair gently; you smiled back as nicely as you could and kissed his cheek in response. “Don’t run off like that again, okay? You scared me.”

“I won’t. I love you too.” You said; you both knew you would try again though. For now, Natsume was content to believe you and you settled for trying to pretend your captivity wasn’t slowly eating away at your mind and heart.

“Why can’t we just go back the way we were?” You began crying softly into his shirt; Natsume stroked your hair. “What happened to us? What can I do to bring that Natsume back?”

“Shhh, hey, there’s no need to cry.” Natsume assured you as he ran his hands over your shaking shoulders; he tucked you under the blankets, fully ready to resume the peaceful Sunday morning with the woman he loved so, so much. “I’m not mad or anything. Maybe I’ll take you out sometime later; let’s just relax and go back to sleep.”

You closed your eyes and tried to calm down; all you could do now was sleep, sleep and dream of the days where you weren’t a prisoner of the man you once loved.

Natsume chuckled quietly as you leaned against him, emotionally and physically exhausted; you looked so cute to him in that moment. Could anyone blame him for wanting to keep you all to himself? You tried not to shrink away from his touch as he kissed your neck, nibbling the skin lightly with a smile.

“I’m crazy for you, you know that?”
“Now over here we have the twin’s room.” Masaomi directed you down the hallway. “They’ve also moved out a while ago, so all you really need to do is vacuum and dust them every now and then.”

“I can’t believe you have so many brothers.” You said; this was probably the tenth room you’ve seen vacant, but it was obviously inhabited at one point.

“You should’ve seen it when we all lived together.” Masaomi replied with a chuckle. “I must say, I sort of miss the ruckus. Even my youngest brother is out busy with school or club activities half the time.” Masaomi blushed slightly. “Uh, sorry, I’m rambling and when I should be showing you what to do.”

“No, it’s interesting.” You insisted. “It’s really sweet you care so much about your family. Are there any other rooms I need to clean?”

Masaomi had already showed you the kitchen, the dining room, the living room, even all the bathrooms. You were a bit shocked at how big the place was, but of course it’d have to be roomy with thirteen siblings living under one roof.

Masaomi hummed in thought. “There’s still the garden. Iori used to tend it everyday, but you could just water and rake up any leaves when necessary.”

“This place is beautiful.” You looked out at the cherry blossom tree. “It’s like something out of a magazine.”

“Thank you.” Masaomi led you to the kitchen. “I need to go to work soon, but I had Ukyo fix you a snack.”

“Oh, you didn’t have to.” You said catching sight of the plate set out for you; even the food looked like something a professional chef would cook.

“Nonsense, you’ll need something to keep up your energy.” Masaomi patted you on the head lightly, but hurriedly retracted his hand. “I-I’m sorry, that was a bit rude of me.”

You just giggled. “Please, it’s fine. Now you go to work and leave this to me.”

Masaomi nodded sheepishly. “I usually come home later in the evening; please, make yourself comfortable in the guest room, take time to unpack and eat.” he threw on his coat and picked up his bag. “I’ll let you know if I won’t be back in time for dinner.”

“Alright!” You grinned and waved as Masaomi took his leave; it didn’t take too long to fix up the bedrooms and for the most part the rest of the house just had a small layer of dust and a few cobwebs here and there. Otherwise, you were quite surprised Masaomi even needed a live in housekeeper.

“Well, he’s not here that often.” You reminded yourself; in fact, your supervisor mentioned that even the lawyer brother was married and only visited sporadically. “I could never live in such a big place alone…it’s a bit creepy…”

Masaomi had told you the truth when he said he was usually home late; it was past ten by the time he walked through the door.

“Oh welcome home.” You rose from the couch. “Let me go heat up your dinner.”
“Huh?” Masaomi stared as you busied yourself in the kitchen with a premade platter of food. “You really didn’t have to wait up for me.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble.” You said breezily. “I got done with the chores earlier than I thought, so I took a quick nap earlier and made dinner.”

“Thank you.” Masaomi said quietly as you pulled his food from the microwave.

“Here, let me grab you something to drink.”

Masaomi began eating his food with a small smile as you sat down across from him with your own food.

“Masaomi, can I ask you something?”

“Hm, sure, ask away.”

“I was wondering...why do you still live here?” You asked carefully. “It just seems like it’d be more convenient to move into a smaller space.”

“It would be,” Masaomi confessed as he took a sip from his drink. “To be honest, I do miss having a full house, but in case my brothers ever need somewhere to stay, I’d like to be here.” he smiled sheepishly. “Besides, I’m pretty attached to this place.”

“I see what you mean.” You nodded. “Well, I’ll do my best to keep this place ready for when you get home.”

The job was a lot easier than you expected; you had way more free time than expected for someone who was put in charge of cleaning for such a large apartment. You really only needed to tidy up the empty rooms about once a week and since you were the only one who cooked, the kitchen was usually immaculately clean along with the living room where you were barely even present.

“Honestly, Masaomi could probably just keep the place in good shape without a twenty four hour housekeeper.” It was already the end of the day and you had done hardly any work aside from sweeping up the cherry blossoms and doing a quick sweeping.

The one regular duty you had was to make meals, and even then it was only a late dinner when Masaomi came home. He had given up insisting that you not stay up so late to greet him; if anything, you felt it was the least you could do.

“Has it been slow at the hospital?” You asked curiously; Masaomi nodded with a sweet smile.

“Why do you ask?”

“You’ve been coming home earlier lately. I’m glad you have the chance to get more sleep.”

“Yeah, that is nice.” Masaomi was oddly subdued the rest of dinner; as you were clearing the dishes, you noticed Masaomi still sitting at the table with slumped shoulders.


He smiled a little. “Is it that obvious I’m not feeling well?”

“Are you sick?”

“No.....I want to thank you for everything you’ve done here.”
“Of course, there’s no need to thank me.” You chuckled. “This is what you hired me for.”

Masaomi’s mouth thinned to a frown. “That’s...not what I needed you to say.” he stood up and walked toward you. “I want you to say, you’re happy here. I want to hear that you’ve enjoyed staying here, that you feel like this is your home….that you’re happy being here with me.”

“I am happy.” You said uncertainly.

“But as an employee.”

You stiffened as Masaomi loomed over you with a sad smile. “I-I-

“Is there anything you’d like to tell me?” Masaomi asked gently.

“Masaomi...it’s been great working here...but I think things have gotten too personal between us.” You admitted. “It’s not appropriate.”

“Then quit your job.” Masaomi laughed as if the solution couldn’t be more clear. “I know it’s a bit of an old fashioned idea, but...if you married me, you could stay here and do everything you already do,” Masaomi placed his palm against your flushed cheek. “And then some.”

“I,” You smiled warmly as Masaomi looked into your eyes pleadingly. “Yes, I-I’d love to!”

“Thank you!” Masaomi lifted your into the air and planted a kiss on the top of your head. “You won’t regret this. I love you very much; I’m just sorry I didn’t say anything sooner.”

Frankly, there were many things he should have told you sooner.

Like how he had first heard of you a year ago when the mother of one of his patients had been raving about a woman who was the “perfect nanny’ and been extremely sorry to let such a hard working housekeeper go as she wasn’t able to afford her rates anymore; the woman had sighed forlornly at the loss of a prospective wife for her eldest son and at the time Masaomi himself felt it was high time he found a partner of his own.

Like how all his brothers were gone and he was starting to feel the loneliness that came from living alone in a home full of empty rooms and fading memories.

Like how he had been tracking your job history and the second he found out you were currently unemployed, he sent out a request for your services and how he had made sure your stay there was akin to the life of a housewife more than a maid. He needed you to see what he could offer her and you fell for it hook, line, and sinker.

There were many things Masaomi probably should’ve have mentioned to the woman he had planned to marry for months before she had ever even set eyes on him.

But you didn’t need to know any of that.
“The wedding was beautiful.” Ukyou told you as he escorted you outside the church. “You really outdid yourself this time.”

“I’m glad to hear it; tell your mom congratulations from me, will you?” You asked him as he held open the door for you. The quaint church wedding with an outdoor reception was definitely the way to go; perfect weather, perfect scenery, everything was just right. It helped that you had a history with the client; you knew what Miwa would enjoy.

“Won’t you stay for the reception?” Ukyou asked.

“Honestly, it looks like fun, but I’m just too exhausted.” You said apologetically as you made your way to your car. “But then again, your family has always been so lively, I could never keep up.”

Your laugh faded as Ukyou stared at you wistfully; you ducked your head to search for your keys in your purse. You could already see where this was going.

“I understand,” Ukyou smiled kindly. “You’ve done so much to help; I’m sorry….I hope my request didn’t make you uncomfortable, but you really are a talented planner and I couldn’t think of who else I would trust to coordinate such an event.”

“No, it was fine!” You assured him maybe a bit too suddenly. “It was nice to see everyone again.”

“Even me?”

The question came out innocently enough, playful with a hint of familiar friendliness, but it made you feel a bit on edge as Ukyou held open your car door.

“Yes, even you.” You replied back with what you hoped wasn’t a slightly strained smile; you knew Ukyou well enough and anytime now you expected him to start his spiel of light chatting until it led to a subject you had thought neither of you wanted to discuss. As nurturing and borderline motherly as he was, Ukyou didn’t win all those cases with his baking skills.

“I’m sorry. I don’t want you to think badly of me.” Ukyou confessed quietly. “I was hoping maybe we could meet up sometime.”

“Ukyo,” You sighed as you sat down in the front seat and buckled up. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it, I’d just like to have a chance to talk with you and catch up. Maybe our relationship is over, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care about you.” Ukyou bashful smile was already disarming you. “Nothing fancy; perhaps you could come over and have dinner with us later this week? I know the rest of the clan would love to see you again too, there wasn’t much opportunity to chat over wedding preparations.”

“Ukyo...I care about you too. I really do, but I just don’t think this is a good idea.”

“It’s just dinner with old friends.” Ukyou frowned a bit sadly. “Is that really so bad?”

“No, but…” You sighed; the day he came to you, decked out in his fitted suit, hair slicked back, and a sincerely happy smile making his eyes crease at the corner, you knew nothing good could come from it. Perhaps it really was just an innocent invitation for reminiscing and a good meal.
Perhaps you would enjoy a delightful evening visiting some of the people you used to be so closed to, maybe even connect with a past love and begin a lasting new friendship instead.

“Please, I promise things won’t get uncomfortable for you.” Ukyou backed away from the car a bit with a shrug. “The worst that can happen is our new sister’s pet scratches one of my brothers…”

You let a giggle escape and sighed lightly. “Alright. Tell me when, and I’ll be there.”

He gave you a winning smile. “Wonderful.”

The week somehow went by slowly and too quickly for your nerves; it wasn’t even as if you and Ukyou had parted on hostile terms. The breakup was a bit sudden, but for you it needed to be done. As well as he looked after you, you didn’t appreciate the way Ukyou hovered. You weren’t a child after all, but he never seemed to get the memo, and as time went on the behavior went farther than just overbearing.

“Welcome.” Ukyou greeted you; warmth practically radiated from his whole aura, and despite your misgivings, you couldn’t help feeling comfortable as you stepped inside the Asahina home.

“By the way, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Ukyou really didn’t even need to explain as you took in the sight of the empty dining room table; no brothers, no step sister, no food, not even any dinnerware set out.

“Where is everyone?”

“Well…” Ukyou began. “Hikaru is traveling, Kaname, Natsume, Fuuto, and Louis are stuck at work, Masaomi, Tsubaki, and Azusa won’t be home until late, Subaru and Iori is staying over at the college for practice, Yusuke and Ema are staying overnight over at friend’s for studying, and Wataru is staying the weekend with Miwa and Rintarou-san; he missed her and she thought it’d be good for him to get to know Rintarou.”

You put a hand on your hip and just looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I-I didn’t plan this!” Ukyou held his hands out defensively. “You know, this isn’t exactly out of the ordinary, except for Yusuke and Ema; she takes her studying seriously, and he seems to be following her lead…” Ukyou looked contemplative for a second as you clicked your tongue.

“You always know their schedules, huh? On top of everything as always.” You chuckled. “Can I help with dinner then?”

“Nonsense, please make yourself comfortable. I’m almost done. If you’d like, feel free to use the ladies room.”

“The ladies room?!” You laughed, not at him, but in amusement. “You know, I always loved the way you talked. It’s formal, but…”

“But what?”

“It’s cute.” You admitted. “Ukyou...I’m sorry for being so suspicious. I was just being over cautious, but you’ve been nothing but considerate since we met again.”

“I’m just glad we could meet again at all.” Ukyou told you as he continued his food preparations. “I’ll won’t be done for a bit longer, so take your time.”
You took the elevator up to the second floor; it was only when the doors opened did you realize something very crucial.

“It’s been so long.” You moaned in slight frustration. “Where the heck’s the bathroom?”

The hallways and doors all looked the same; you walked around, trying to remember which way you had come from. As the seconds ticked by, you got more and more panicked; after maybe five minutes, you were officially lost and couldn’t even figure out where the elevator was.

“I wonder if Ukyou will come looking for me after a while…” You mumbled as you looked around for any hint you were actually getting anywhere. You made yet another turn and came to a door with a somewhat larger frame; it was a double door, and a bit farther away than most of the other rooms.

“Maybe I can at least get an idea where I am.” You didn’t bother to knock on the door seeing as how everyone was gone.

Your first impression was how gorgeous the room was; plush carpeting, a king sized bed with curtains carefully pulled over polished wooden posts, and even a large window overlooking the city skyline. It was obviously the master bedroom, though it didn’t look as though anyone used it.

“It is a bit much for just one person.” You stepped inside and saw the room had a hallways connecting to another section. “Don’t tell me there’s a huge walk in closet or something. Well, at least there’s probably a bathroom…”

It was a closet, not as big as your wild imagination suggested, but big enough to qualify for luxurious. But that wasn’t what made you drop your purse, the contents rolling out on the carpet as you gaped.

It was a picture of you among others; there were several lining the shelves, but it was much more than that.

“Did Ukyou do this…?”

The bedroom door creaked open slightly; you turned your head just in time to see your old flame step inside.

“Oh no, you weren’t supposed to see this yet.” Ukyou smiled apologetically. “Now, I know wedding planning is really your strong suit, but I saw this dress, and I just couldn’t help myself.”

He stepped over to the closet and switched on the light to illuminate the flowing white dress; you looked at it in a daze.

“I knew he could get controlling, but this?” You stumbled back from his concerned gaze.

“Ukyou, what the hell is going on?”

“I just thought we should get a head start on this. You showed me first hand how hard and long it can be to plan the ceremony, so I just figured it would help if I assisted with little details.” Ukyou leaned forward. “You’d look stunning in this, but if it’s not to your liking-”

“IT’S NOT!” You slapped his cheek, eyes flickering with rage. “I can’t believe you. You always think you know what’s best but you hide it under this passive facade. I should’ve known better than to come here. You haven’t changed, you’ve gotten worse!”

“Wait!” Ukyou went after you as you tried to storm out of the room. “I just want a future with you. I
missed you...I never stopped loving you, and you coming back into my life must mean we’re meant to be together.”

“You called me to plan your mother’s wedding! I bet you even knew everyone else would be gone tonight.” You accused sharply.

“I made a mistake of letting you go the first time.” Ukyou went behind you and shut the door firmly. His sad smile never left his face. He seemed genuinely remorseful for what he was about to do.

“I left. I didn’t want to be with you anymore.” You told him with a slight quiver to your firm voice. “Get it through your head.”

Ukyou cupped your face. “I can’t accept that. It’s been so long, but I never forgot how wonderful it felt to have you welcome me home. I never forgot the way you captured my heart and broke it into a thousand piece with one look, one word of rejection. I can’t forget you and I don’t want to.”

You gasped as he leaned in closer, his breath blowing faintly on your lips.

“Never again.”
“Good morning Asahina-san.”

“Good morning.”

There were two armchairs in the center of your office; you gestured for Iori to sit in one and you took the other as you propped up your clipboard. Iori eyed it with what you assumed was a somewhat wary expression.

“I’m required to take notes and document our meetings.” You told him with an apologetic smile; the whole reason you insisted on couches was so your clients could feel on equal footing with you. In your opinion, the last thing patients wanted was to feel scrutinized or as if they had less power.

“I understand.” Iori nodded and fell silent once more; you crossed your legs and smiled lightly.

“My records show you’re here voluntarily, but, forgive me for being so candid, you look a bit uncomfortable.” You said carefully. “Is there something I should know before we continue with our session?”

“...I’m here on my brother’s insistence. My brothers, to be precise.” Iori answered simply.

“It’s nice that they care and want to help, but I take it therapy wasn’t what you had in mind?”

“Please understand and don’t take offense to this. I know you’re a professional and you seem sensible, but I just don’t see how this will help me.”

You looked him in the eyes. “Asahina-san, I’ll be frank. Killing yourself isn’t exactly the most helpful solution either. In fact, it’s not solution. It’s an escape; the only difference between that means of escapism and any other is that once you do it, there’s no turning back.” Your lips quirked at the corners. “Unless you believe in reincarnation.”

You sighed as Iori’s stare broke off from yours; despite years of experience, you had to admit, you hadn’t seen this coming. Most of your patients couldn’t be more transparent. They made it painfully obvious they weren’t right in the head or that they had issues that hung over them almost like a visible storm cloud.

But Iori was different. The day this well mannered, well spoken, properly handsome young man stepped into your office, you immediately thought there must be some sort of mistake. People who had everything going for them, looks, money, and education simply didn’t think of suicide almost constantly.

“I need to stop that way of thinking though.” You told yourself as Iori shifted in his seat. “He lost someone he loved right in front of him, who wouldn’t be messed up by that?”

Still, you wished he could’ve come to see you sooner; it was years since the accident that took Iori’s first girlfriend from him, which was plenty of time for him to take to negative ways of coping with his pain and depression.

“Asahina-san, you know you don’t have to be here.” You said empathetically. “You’re an adult and if you really don’t want therapy, you might as well leave.”

“Aren’t you supposed to ask me how I’m feeling?” Iori looked more puzzled than insulted at
basically being told to hit the road.

“Only if you want me to.” You shrugged as you leaned forward slightly. “Any means of helping a person doesn’t mean much unless the person is willing to accept it. These sessions won’t do anything for you if you don’t give them serious consideration; if you blow this off as a waste of time, then it will be. Now, in another instance, I’d refer you to a colleague, but since you appear to be adverse to therapy in general, all I can say is that you need to find your own way of coping. Counseling isn’t for everyone, especially if you’re not even willing to give it a chance. Your brothers may mean well, but I wouldn’t recommend this type of treatment if you don’t want it. You need to find your own way.”

Iori stared unblinkingly as you smiled.

“Regardless of the circumstances, it was nice meeting you. I do hope you take care of yourself.”

“Her name was Shiraishi Fuyuka.”

You pulled back as tears spilled from Iori’s eyes; he was smiling ever so gently.

“She used to tell me that everyday after we parted ways on the way home. ‘Take care of yourself’, she’d tell me.” Iori bowed his head. “I still hear it... I need to hear it again. I suppose this sounds awfully weak, but I feel as if my life stopped after hers did. Why not kill myself? I’m already dead.”

“Asahina-san, may I say something?”

“Yes…”

“You may hate me for saying so, but you’re young. Your life isn’t even half over yet. You have so much potential; from what you’ve just said, Fuyuka-san would never want this for you. You don’t have to live your life this way, as if it doesn’t matter.” You took one of his trembling hands and squeezed. “It’s like I said, you have options. It’s just up to you whether to take them.”

Iori regained his composure and chuckled. “I don’t suppose you have a second job as a motivational speaker?”

“Part of my job is motivating. Asahina-san, there’s something you need to know about therapy. It’s not a quick fix; no treatment really is. If you decide to seek counseling from me or really anyone, it may take a long time before it works. It can take years to help a person be able to cope with their issues in a positive way. Some people never stop going to therapy, they simply need it to be able to sort of even themselves out. And one more thing you need to know.”

“What is it?”

“Never feel ashamed to seek help.” You told him seriously. “Too many people in our country outright refuse to get any sort of help, and as a result, they either end up hurting themselves or others. It’s not a shameful thing to want professional help for any problems you may want to solve; it takes a strong person to take the first step in doing so.”

“I’m not really one to talk much about my feelings in general.” Iori confessed. “I value my privacy... I’m not comfortable with sharing too much information, especially with strangers.”

“You don’t have to tell me everything.” You replied. “I would strongly recommend telling me tidbits that could help me assist you in recovery. I’m not here to judge you Asahina-san, just to listen and aid you. I won’t make you do anything you’re uncomfortable with and it’s illegal for me to share any information that is spoken here unless this information could lead to you or others doing something illegal or harmful. Do you understand that?”
“Yes, it makes me feel a bit more at ease.” Iori said softly. “I’m not so sure about this still...but I’d like to at least try it. I’d like to continue talking with you.”

“That makes me happy to hear.” You gave him an encouraging smile. “But please don’t feel like you have to see me; I’ve referred numerous patients to professionals more suited to their personalities and troubles, as well as ones with more effective plans and strategies to help them. Not everyone can follow the same treatment.”

“I want you.”

You blinked as Iori smiled slightly.

“I wish to continue seeing you. I hope you can forgive my poor first impression.”

“No need to apologize, it’s something that causes apprehension in most first time patients.” You glanced at your watch. “Oh, my next meeting is in ten minutes. Here,”

Iori took the paper folder you produced and handed to him. “A calendar?”

“This is my schedule this month. Take the time to look over what time would be best for you and whether you’d like to keep that time slot as a regular meeting date.” You bowed as Iori began walking toward the door. “Thank you for taking this step. My phone can be reached at anytime.”

“Thank you doctor…”

You waved blithely as Iori stood there a bit stiffly. “Have a goodnight.”
“....ever since then, I reasoned that the only way for us to be together again was for me to die as well.”

“Iori-san, may I interrupt?”

Iori nodded quickly; he loved the sound of your voice. Sometimes he wished the roles were switched around so that he could be the one hearing you talk. Ever since the sessions began, he had told you nearly every thought and feeling he had pertaining to Fuyuka’s death and his desire to leave the world as well. Iori knew it was your job to listen, but he knew so little about you.

“From what you’ve told me, Fuyuka-san sounds like very a caring girl. You say you believe the two of you can be happy together in the afterlife, but what I’m certain that’s not what she would’ve wanted for you.” You told Iori gently; you didn’t want to rile him up, but the truth needed to be said. “I’m sure if she could hear and see you now, she’d be heartbroken that you’d take your own life. If she really loved you, she would want you to live and try to be as happy as you could be, wouldn’t she?”

“Yes. I have no delusions that it’s what she would’ve wanted.” Iori nodded slowly. “But a life without her just didn’t seem worth living. To be honest doctor, I don’t know what else to do with these feelings.”

“What do you mean?”

Iori knew you wouldn’t judge him for what he wanted to say, but nonetheless, he sincerely wished he could sink into the couch and disappear. Your gaze was nothing but concerned and calm, but he felt so exposed.

“It just all seems so pointless. School, my friends, even my family; I just feel like I’m going through the motions, and could you really call that living?”

“No, I suppose not…”

“Then what’s the point?” Iori meant for it to sound like a rhetorical question, but it came out in a weak tone. “What’s the point of living if I’m just going to be miserable, if my pain is just going to be a burden on my family?”

“That’s up for you to decide.” You told him without missing a beat. “You’ve already accepted that there’s a problem you need to get past, but there are several things you can do from here on out.”

“I’m sorry, I know what you’re trying to say, but I simply don’t know what those things are.” Iori sighed.

“Well, for one thing, you can just take better care of yourself and come to terms with the fact that it’s not your fault Fuyuka died.”

Iori flinched slightly, but you pressed on; dancing around the issue wouldn’t help him.

“You didn’t know it would happened; she didn’t even know until it was too late. I’m not saying to stop feeling sad over it; when you care about someone, you can’t help feel that way when they can’t be there anymore.” You smiled wearily as Iori looked up at you from his slumped over position. “But you shouldn’t feel guilty for it.”
“I don’t know what to do…I feel as if I’m just going in circles. I want more than this, but I still have doubts whether I even still deserve it…”

“You do.”

Iori’s eyes glistened as he bent his head and took a shaky breath to calm himself down; why did you have to say such kind words to him when he was already feeling so vulnerable? Were you trying to drive him even more insane?

“Iori-san, it seems what most people with a void in their lives is something to look forward to.” You said after he had calmed down somewhat. “It could be something small; a show, a club, meeting up with a friend, anything to make you anticipate the next day. It could be something more significant.”

“Like what?”

“Some sort of hobby to take up, like your gardening, could be good. Your flowers are so beautiful, you could enter them in contests or showcases.”

Iori smiled ever so slightly and shrugged. “Thank you.”

“In general, I guess a goal is what you need.” You suggested. “You’re a very proactive person...what I think you need is to take more action in your life. No more speculating, no more questioning; if you really want something Iori-san, just go for it.”

“How do you really think that would help?”

You nodded. “I really do. You have so much going for you Iori-san; you’re a wonderful student, a good brother, young and good looking, you have so much of your life still ahead of you. It’s okay to have pain, most people carry some sort of burden, but there’s still people in your life who would be just as devastated to see you gone as you did when Fuyuka-san died. There may even be someone out there in the world who’s waiting for you, but you’ll never know if you don’t try to live your life.”

“I never really thought of it that way...but what if there is no one? Doctor, I miss Shiraishi, but I feel like…” Iori raised his eyes to look at you pleadingly; you had seen him in several states of emotion. Content, hurt, sad, amused, bashful, even angry; but you had never seen him so lost. He was grasping at straws, feeling trapped and in so much pain, and he didn’t know how to deal with. He was slowly getting his passion back, but even with that, he still didn’t know what to do with it.

“But that’s where I come in.” You thought as Iori clasped his hands and bent his head somberly; he almost looked as though he were praying to god to give him some answers. “I need to encourage him.”

“What? Please tell me.”

Iori roughly swallowed the lump in his throat. “I think I may be falling in love.”

“That’s wonderful Iori-san! What is she like? I had no idea you were seeing someone again.”

Iori frowned. “She’s sort of like Shiraishi in a way; kind, patient, but she’s even more bold and charming. I know you must think that this is a good thing, like I’m finally moving on, but I feel so guilty. I feel as though I’m forsaking Shiraishi.”

“It’s been years since that day. You deserve to be find happiness, whether it’s alone or in a new relationship.” You reminded him. “You have no reason to feel guilt for this; falling in love is never a bad thing.”
“I haven’t even told them how I feel...if they rejected me, I-”

“Don’t think about that.” You told him abruptly. “Iori-san, if you want my advice, I’d just go for it. Be honest with your feelings and you can’t go wrong.”

“I understand.” Iori smiled shyly.

“This is it.” Iori stood in front of the modest house, his fingers trembling slightly around the small pot of flowers; he prayed he didn’t drop it as he walked to your door on wobbling legs. He slowly lifted his hand and rang the doorbell.

“Hello?”

Iori was star struck; he had only seen you in casual clothes whenever he looked through your living room window to watch you read or watch the television. Now you were right in front of him, and he was suddenly hit with the image of lounging on the couch with you, limbs intertwined and bodies warm, like a real couple.

“Iori-san? What are you doing here?” You opened your door all the way. “Is everything alright? How did you even-?”

“I’m sorry to drop by so unexpectedly, but there’s two things I need to tell you in person. Forgive me, but your address was on the back of the calendar you provided for me…”

“Oh.” You flushed a bit in embarrassment. “I completely forgot about that...Iori-san, it’s not appropriate for you to be here right now.”

“Please don’t worry. As a matter of fact, that’s exactly what I want to discuss with you. May I come?”

“I suppose, but quickly.” You ushered him inside. “Have a seat, sorry the place is a bit messy. Would you like something to drink? I’m making green tea.”

Iori gracefully sat down at the low table and smiled; he felt his stomach churning nervously as he watched you pour the tea into two cups. What would it be like to come by for visits to chat and have tea? No professional obligation, no boundaries, just two people in love and enjoying each other’s company.

“That would be nice, thank you very much.”

You placed the steaming cup in front of him with a half smile. “Now, what’s so important you had to come here so late? And what’s with the flowers?”

“I should explain before telling you.” Iori smelled his tea and sipped; it was heavenly. “I’m not going to be continuing therapy any longer. I thank you for everything you’ve done for me, I assure you, I realize how wrong I was about seeking counseling. I will always be grateful for meeting you, even if
it was due to unfortunate circumstances.”

“That’s good to hear, but you could’ve have just called me or waited until our next meeting. I feel like there’s something else going on.” You replied, concern etched all across your face; Iori took another gulp of tea and burned the tip of his tongue slightly.

“Ahem...well, that brings us to the primroses. These are part of my thank you.” Iori placed the potted plant in the middle of the table; the flowers were vibrantly pink and white in the center. You pulled them across the table toward you and surveyed them in awe.

“Are these from your garden?”

“Yes. I’d wager they’re the best ones I’ve grown this season.” Iori told you with a hint of pride as your fingers caressed the petals. “But that’s only part of the reason they’re so special...do you know what they symbolize?”

You thought for a moment; this conversation was getting pretty odd, but then again, Iori could be somewhat odd for all his charms and graces.

“I think it means youth, right?” You said as you sniffed the flowers. “Primroses symbolize being young or bashful.”

“Yes, but that meaning also ties in with the idea of young love and innocence.” Iori moved around the table to sit almost next to you as he adjusted the flowers lovingly. “At first, I used to think of Shiraishi when I saw these flowers, and so it pained me to even think of growing them again. She was my first love and with her death, my innocence and naive beliefs came crashing down on me. These flowers mean, ‘I can’t live without you’, something I thought I’d only ever feel for my childhood love.”

“.....I’m so sorry Iori-san.” You whispered as you took one of his hands firmly. “I mean it. Professionalism aside, I wish you all the happiness in the world. It was tragic what happened and it pains me to see someone go through so much. I hope I really have been of some help to you these past months.”

“You have.” Iori insisted. “You see, these flowers used to make me terribly sad, but that’s not the case anymore. Do you know what I saw all this time as I cultivated and tended to them, as I cared and nurtured them so they would bloom and look as beautiful as they should?”

You could only shake your head; his usually soft voice had become so impassioned the more he spoke.

“Now these flowers remind me that I still have so much to live for, that I have new love in my heart to share with someone just as, maybe even more worthy than Shiraishi. I feel so young and carefree for the first time in such a long time, like my life has started anew. And it’s all because of you...that’s why your face is all I could see as I grew these flowers.”

“I...” Your hand dropped to the table slowly as you stared at his sweetly smiling face; he looked happier than you had ever seen him as he took one of your hands carefully in his and ran the thumb over your knuckle.

“You’re all I can see...you told me to go for it, to confess my feelings, and I knew right then that I was meant to be with you. Though I did admit I was a bit worried...you almost sounded like you didn’t care if I saw another woman, but you knew in your heart it was you I’ve loved didn’t you? You’re so smart, I’m sure you saw right through me.”
“Iori-san, you’ve got the wrong idea! I do care about you as a person and a client, but I’m not in love with you. I thought you were talking about a girl from one of your classes or something.” You tried not to shove the pot of flowers over at him as you spoke evenly. “Please believe me, I only ever intended to be your therapist. Even if you were no longer my patient, any sort of deeper relationship would be considered scandalous. I could even lose my job if the right person found out.”

“No one will find out! I promise, I won’t tell anyone; we don’t have to go out on dates or see each other all the time. I could just come over here when you’re free.” Iori took on a reassuring tone at your rapidly paling face. “No one has to know about us….I don’t care if I can’t brag to my friends about you or even if I have to lie to my family, just as long as we can be together.”

“No! You’re missing the point,” You switched from trying to sound firm and soothing to just being outright frustrated; this situation was getting completely out of hand and Iori needed a reality check. “I don’t want to be in a relationship with you. I don’t love you.”

Iori’s hands loosened around your own; his eyes were wide and strained as he silently mouthed words back as if repeating your statement for himself. You didn’t feel much relief at his reaction; his eyes had the same lost look as they had before.

“No...no, please don’t do this…”

“Iori-san, you need to leave. Please don’t make me use force or call the police.” You pulled his limp form by his shoulders and pointed toward the door; Iori yanked himself out of your hold and was sent tumbling back into your china cabinet. It teetered and crashed to the floor as you screamed.

“I-I’m sorry, forgive me-“ Iori rushed over to you. “Are you hurt? Did any of the glass get on you?”

“Iori get out of here!” You violently shoved him away and his back hit the edge of your kitchen counter with a hard thump. Iori looked at you unseeingly, hands shaking, and after a moment of silence, his eyes found your knife block.

Iori reached for the largest knife.

“Iori, what are you doing?!”

“I’m sorry for causing you any distress.” Iori choked out weakly as he took the knife in both of his hands and held it with a vice grip to steady the blade; the tip was pointed at his neck.

“No!” You sobbed as Iori brought the tip even closer with a deep breath; tears were running down his cheeks as he gave you one last smile.

“I’m sorry all your effort has gone to waste, but I can’t do it. I can’t stand living knowing the woman I love has rejected me. I’m not as strong as you thought doctor; please forgive me for doing this in front of you, but I want the last thing I see in this world to be you. I wish I could see you always…”

“IORI!”

The front door crashed open; three cops came through with astounding speed, and before Iori could gather his senses, one of his shoulders was shot cleanly on the side. You clamped your hands to your mouth as he fell to his knees, eyes never leaving your face for a moment as the other two men pulled him out of the house and into a just arriving ambulance.

You could barely even hear one of the cop’s explanation that the next door neighbor who had heard a loud crash and a frightful scream was certain an intruder had broken into the house next door and had called the police department as soon as possible.
These words went through one ear and out the other as you stood staring at the spot where a bit of Iori’s blood stained the floor as it dripped from his wound; you later heard that he has only been in shock and had no lasting damage caused by the wound. After his stay in the hospital, you were informed he would remain in a top notch mental institution, where he would hopefully receive the help he so desperately needed.

None of it mattered; the sight of his terrified expression and his struggling to break free of the police would haunt you for years to come.

The smell of copper and the broken flower pot you kept on your bookshelf would be a constant reminder of that day where you had witnessed a man come undone at the seams.

The sound of his desperate pleas and cries for you to save him would never leave you until the day you died.
“Thank you everybody!” You cried out into the microphone; your feet were aching from dancing and your throat was bordering on sore, but the roar of applause and cheers made you want to run around with unrestrained energy. “This is all thanks to your support, get home safely!!!”

You panted as you went backstage and got a bottle of water; your manager practically skipped over to you with a grin.

“That was wonderful, the perfect performance to end your tour!” she gushed as she handed you a clean towel to wipe away the sweat; you couldn’t get used to how hot the stage lights were. “You did a good job out there.”

“Thank you ma’am!” You smiled back. “I’m just going to head back to my dressing room and go back to the apartment as soon as I clean up.”

“Okay, but remember, go to bed as soon as you get home and make sure to drink something warm for your throat!” she called after you as you walked away hurriedly; the adrenaline was wearing off and you were suddenly feeling as if you had run a marathon.

“Congratulations on ending your tour.”

Your hand had just touched the doorknob to your private room when you heard someone greet you, an oddly teasing note to their voice.

“Thank you-” You gasped and nearly dropped your towel. “Asakura-san?! What-I thought you were touring in Europe!”

Fuuto smiled easily and held out a bouquet of roses. “I was, but I’m in town to visit my family. I hurried home and I was luckily just in time to see your performance.”

“Oh, thank you very much.” You took the flowers incredulously. “Did you really like the show?”

“I loved it.” Fuuto told you without missing a beat. “I came here right after I got off the plane, and I was just in time to see your finale.”

“You must be exhausted! You should be resting, not going to concerts.” You said worriedly; you didn’t know Fuuto personally, but you knew he was a quickly rising star in the music industry and he had an incredibly busy schedule. To think he had made such an effort to see your last performance was flattering to say the least.

“Nonsense. To see you shining so radiantly was simply revigorating.” Fuuto assured you. “Besides, I did come for a good reason. I wanted to see you live before I made the decision to approach you for a duet collaboration.”

Your grip on the roses tightened in excitement. “Are you sure?”

“Of course! Look, here’s the hotel I’m staying at; come by sometime soon and we can talk out the details. I’m sure you need sleep right now, so take some time to think about it. If it doesn’t work out, i’d still love to chat with you.”

You were easily swayed by Fuuto’s words and could barely get a wink of sleep all night; still part of you was a bit nervous at meeting up with him. You would make sure to dress in something
inconspicuous so as not to draw attention to yourself, but the thought someone may catch sight of you going to his place was still a bit daunting.

The thing about being an idol was that your image meant everything; if there was any hint that you were seeing someone it might damage your reputation. Your manager had been able to talk your recording company out of making you sign a contract to stay single until you were twenty five, but there was no doubt the public might have an incredibly negative reaction to you so much as being seen alone with a man.

“I wonder if Fuuto thought of that; if he’s seen with me, his fans might run rabid!” You realized as you discreetly took the elevator to Fuuto’s suite. “Still, this collaboration could be great for both of our careers...I suppose he’s willing to take a chance on it.”

“Glad you made it here in one piece!” Fuuto said as he led you inside. “Would you like something to drink? I hope you didn’t go out of your way.”

“Oh no, it was no trouble at all.” You draped your coat and hat on the rack by the door; Fuuto came back with two glasses of what looked like champagne and handed you one with a warm smile.

“Don’t worry, it’s non-alcoholic.” Fuuto chuckled as you timidly took the glass. And the two of you clinked the glasses together gently. “A toast, to our duet.”

“I’m seriously excited.” he said as he sat down on the couch and patted the seat next to him; you felt a bit nervous sitting right next to him, but decided it’d be rude to sit somewhere else.

“Same here. Before we talk, I just wanted to say congratulations.” Fuuto looked confused and put down his drink. “What do you mean?”

“You have serious talent, and I see you have a knack for acting too. It’s really amazing how quickly your career is taking off.” You felt a bit embarrassed, but he didn’t seem weirded out. “I mean, everyone knows how dedicated you are to your work and I’m honored you asked me to do a project with you. I promise, I’ll work just as hard.”

You felt your face heat up a bit; Fuuto was staring at you blankly, his drink was beginning to leave a ring of condensation on the table’s service.

“I...don’t know what to say.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. I’m sure you get praise like that constantly.”

“Yeah, but,” Fuuto’s laugh sounded almost sheepish. “You saying it means a lot...I was kinda inspired by you actually. Your pep and attitude are so charming, it’s no wonder you’re so popular.”

“Aw, thanks...”

“I mean it.” Fuuto said seriously; he toyed with the stem of his champagne glass. “As a matter of fact before we start, I’d really like to show you something.”

“Sure, what is it?”

“Hold on, I’ll be right back!” Fuuto said; he disappeared into another room and came right back out with a thick book; he propped it on his lap and to your surprise it was decorated with your sticker collection. The cover was plastered with hearts and stars and musical notes.
“What is this?”

“Look,” Fuuto opened the first page, and you saw it was covered with newspaper and magazine clippings. “This is from your very first interview.”

“This is….wow, I don’t even remember doing this one…” You began to slowly flip through the pages; each one was either another news story, a magazine article, a photo, and miscellaneous items given out at your shows like old glowsticks and miniature fan flags.

“I’ve been collecting them since you first started out. I actually have all the photo books, but I left them in my own room.” Fuuto told you as you looked up at him with somewhat wide eyes. “I have to confess, I had ulterior motives for inviting you here….I’m your biggest fan and I’ve always wanted to go up on stage with you. I’ve dreamed about it ever since I made it big.”

It wasn’t until that moment you noticed how close Fuuto was sitting; you were so distracted by the strange book you hadn’t realized your thighs were touching. He turned your face towards him with a tender smile.

“And it’s not just about our careers. I want you to be my girlfriend.”

You froze as he kissed you; the only thing that managed to wake you from your shock was the tip of his tongue brushing against your lips teasingly.

“Asakura-kun stop it!” You roughly shoved him away and leapt from the couch like a cat dosed with water. “I’m leaving, this is completely unprofessional!”

“You know what’s really unprofessional? Dating when you know it would hurt both our reputations.”

You paused and whirled around to glower at him. “What does that mean?”

“It means it’ll won’t look good if anyone see the video I taped of us kissing.”

“What? You didn’t-!”

“Actually, I did.” Fuuto replied with a cheerful shrug. “I put in camera’s beforehand and if I edit the video just right, it’ll look like we’re a couple. It’s so unfortunate, but it’d be bad news for you if it got out that you were secretly dating. I really was hoping you’d just consent to it, but the challenge of making you fall for me is pretty exciting still.”

“Hold on just a minute!” You said angrily. “If you show that video to the public then you’ll be in trouble too! Your fans will be even more upset than mine in all likelihood!”

“Oh, I know.”

“B-but why?” You sputtered. “Why would you risk sacrificing your career? Are you that petty?!” You asked in disbelief; this whole scenario had to be part of some celebrity prank show or a huge joke Fuuto set up for your expense, but despite his coy smile, not once did he look as if he wasn’t serious.

“Honestly….I don’t care if my career is ruined. I love my work, but I love you more. I got into this partially because of you. I want to own you and if that means possibly destroying my image, I’ll do it. I don’t mind dating secretly.” Fuuto told you with a sigh. “In fact, I think it’s quite romantic, no? Exciting and thrilling to steal kisses when away from the public eye.”
Your hand fell back to your side; he had you beat. It couldn’t be more obvious that you were the only one who wasn’t willing to give it up.

“But why?” You repeated softly. “You’re crazy, how could you just throw it all away like it’s nothing?”

Fuuto stood from the couch and strolled right up to you. You felt his hand brush against your arm and heard the lock click into place. He never once looked away, his eyes locked on yours, witnessing every emotion you had laid out as if it was all just for him.

“Because the thing I want the most is you little girl, and I always get what I want.”
“Um, hello?” You called out a bit more quietly than you intended. “Is someone there?”

You scanned the forest path but there was no one in sight.

“Huh...am I going mad?” You asked yourself quietly; your attention was caught once again by a snapping twig. The sound came from behind a large oak tree; you could see a faint shadow just around it.

You ever so slowly walked toward the tree, carefully peering around. You gasped in surprise and jumped back; the man started slightly and looked ready to flee himself.

“What the-!?” You stepped away with a wary gaze. “What in the world are you doing hiding behind trees?! Have you been following me or something?!”

The man drew back farther and mumbled; his eyes were docile, and kept to the ground. You took the time to get a good look at him.

“Is that a snake on his shoulder?” You narrowed your eyes as you studied him. “His face…I’ve never seen anyone with scales before. At least, I think they’re scales…”

The stranger did indeed have a small snake lying on his cloaked shoulders, it’s tongue flicking out lazily as his owner stared at the ground.

“What did you say?” You asked more calmly; he was odd, but he hadn’t made a move to hurt you. He just stood there with his back pressed firmly to the tree, as if he wanted to disappear right into the bark.

“I’m sorry.” he finally said in a subdued tone. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I will go, says Donne.”

“Your name is Donne than?”

The man looked up at you blankly. “My family gave me the name Snake, says Donne.”

You continued to stare in confusion. “Alright...who’s Donne?”

Snake nodded to Donne perching on his shoulder; you made a sound of understanding and smiled lightly as his owner stared at the ground.

“Scare me? You mean because of your...um, I’m sorry, what are they exactly?” You asked in a more gentle tone; crazily enough, he almost seemed frightened of you. “Are they scars?”

He nodded shortly, looking a bit embarrassed.

“I see...well, they don’t scare me. I must say, they definitely catch the eye.” You laughed sheepishly; he was still staring at you blankly. “I must be on my way though, so take care Snake.” You grinned and waved as you turned around. “You too Donne.”
You didn’t get far before you heard steps shuffling behind you; you turned around to see Snake’s hesitant gaze. You felt a pang in your chest; you were suddenly struck by the sadness in his eyes.

“We need to get to town too, says Donne.” Snake muttered just loud enough for you to hear.

“You don’t know the way?”

He shook his head and you swore Donne was following his lead.

You smiled kindly and held out your arm. “Come with me then, you can be my escort; it’s dangerous for a lady to travel alone after all. You don’t mind, right?”

Snake shook his head; his arm trembled a bit as he intertwined it with yours. You rested your hand in the crook of his elbow and began walking; while Snake stared straight ahead, Donne looked as though he was studying you most ardently.

Since the first trip, every time you made your daily travel to town, Snake seemed to show up at some point on the way with a shy smile and his little snake acting as translator; though he didn’t say much, he would escort you and diligently stay by your side as you did your shopping. The trips weren’t without some whispers and stares, but you simply ignored them and made sure any persons with something to say saw you two leave together.

“I’m sorry Snake. I wish I could’ve rung that awful cow’s neck.” You whispered harshly as he led you outside the cloth shop; a noble woman had snickered unapologetically loud as Snake was busy fetching you a certain color of thread. “Honestly, people these days are so-ugh!”

Snake smiled ever so softly. “Thank you.”

“There’s nothing to thank me for, you don’t deserve—hold on. Where’s Donne?” You turned to him quickly; you hadn’t realized until that moment the little snake wasn’t perched upon his shoulder.

“I left him with the master I serve.” Snake looked away self consciously. “Is that okay?”

“Of course.” You felt honored; you had learned by now Snake was more shy than aloof. It made you happy he was feeling secure enough to address you directly.

The two of you walked on toward the forest; it was getting a bit dark out already, but you felt safe with Snake accompanying you. It was maybe halfway through the trip that Snake broke the silence.

“May I show you something?”

“What?” You stopped beside him; he certainly was acting a bit strangely today, and now a sudden request?

“I found this little cottage not far from here.” Snake answered. “It’s very nice...I was wondering if I could show it to you.”

“That does sound nice, but it's getting quite late.” You said. “I really should be going home.”

Snake simply stared at his shoes as his arm fell limply to his side; you felt a bit guilty at his melancholy expression.

“Snake, I’m sorry.”

“I knew it. You’re frightened of me, aren’t you?” Snake abruptly raised his face; his expression was a mix of anguish and betrayal. “You said you didn’t mind the way I looked.”
You backed away slightly as he stepped forward. The action made his mouth twist into a frown.

"Do you find me so hideous? I know I look funny..."

“That's not it at all.” You told him. “It's just getting late and it-it’s not safe to be out in the woods after dark.”

“That's why you should come with me.” Snake smiled in relief.

You continued to back away; you had never felt so terrified by a smile before. As you made to run, you tripped and twisted your ankle over a tree root growing out of the ground. You cried out in pain and Snake rushed to your aid.

“You see?” Snake carefully cradled you in his arms; his scales seemed to shine in the moonlight shining through the forest tree branches. You could feel your ankle throbbing and you clutched onto him to keep from falling. “We live in such a dangerous world. A cruel world…” he looked down at you with a morose smile. “You’ve shown me such kindness...all I want to do is repay it.”

“Snake, please, take me home-”

“We are going home. It’s such a nice cottage, I planted you some pretty flowers.” Snake added shyly. “I already stocked it with some supplies, but I’ll try to visit every day. I’ll bring you whatever you need, and I’ll have my friends keep watch over you. Someday, I’ll move in, and we can live together.”

You stared up at him, feeling distinctly faint; you had never heard Snake speak this much at all, let alone for such a disturbed speech.

“I hope you don’t mind, I had Webster accompany us tonight; he was very excited to meet you.”

Snake held you a bit closer; you caught a movement out of the corner of your eye. What you thought was a tree root was actually a long boa constrictor, thicker than a human arm; it slithered around at Snake’s feet and hissed at you. With a sharp gasp, you passed out.

“Don’t be rude Webster.” Snake reprimanded sternly; Webster seemed to bow his head in apology as they neared the abandoned cottage. It was old, but reasonably clean. A row of wild daisies were planted under the front window; Snake smiled as he carried you over the threshold.

“There’s no need to be scared of her.” Snake assured Webster as he carefully set you down on a mattress; Emily, Goethe, and Keats slithered out from under the bed to keep watch. They seemed to study you curiously.

“She is my beloved.” Snake explained to them as he tenderly brushed your hair out of your face and set to mending your ankle; despite being unconscious, your face looked troubled. It made Snake frown in worry.

“I hadn’t meant to hurt her ankle, says Webster.”

Snake patted Webster’s head. “It’s okay, she’ll understand. We’re just trying to help her, says Goethe.”

You turned a bit in your sleep and Snake went back to your side immediately; he lifted a blanket over your body so you wouldn’t catch a cold.

“We’ll protect you dear, says Emily.” Snake lifted one of your limp hands to his rough cheek and
beamed; he imagined what it would feel like when you were awake. Perhaps you'd even let him steal a kiss from time to time.

“I’ll protect you my beloved...forever.”
“Agni, is this really necessary?” Prince Soma whined as Agni looked at him pleadingly.

“Yes Prince Soma. Please do hurry, she’s been waiting downstairs for quite some time now.” Agni reasoned as his ward lounged about on his bed. It couldn’t be more clear how much of a bother he considered all this.

“I don’t see why I need an etiquette teacher. I learned all that stuff back in Bengal, you know that.” Prince Soma huffed and sat up with a frown.

“But highness, you still need to be educated on the etiquette of englishmen.” Agni reminded him patiently. “With all due respect, you yourself promised to learn many things so as to become a great man.” Agni smiled. “Of course, you will always be the greatest to me Prince Soma.”

Prince Soma sighed. “You’re right Agni. I do not want to be stuck in ignorance.” he brightened up a bit. “Ciel will surely be impressed the next time he comes here for a visit if I learn his country’s customs!”

“That’s the spirit my prince! Now, let’s go downstairs to greet your tutor.”

You meanwhile sat in the drawing room, waiting patiently for the prince and his servant to come downstairs; you nibbled on the curry buns Agni had set out for you so generously.

“These are quite good.” You thought glancing up at the stairs.

“I wonder what’s taking them so long…?”

Suddenly, Agni came walking briskly down the steps, smiling apologetically; he stopped where you sat and bowed lowly.

“Please forgive us for the wait miss.”

“Oh no, whenever his highness is ready.” You smiled; you were a bit excited. You had never met royalty before, let alone a prince from a foreign land.

Agni turned to the stairwell. “May I present the 26th son of the Raja of Bengal, Prince Soma Asman Kadar.”

You stood up as the Prince Soma walked down the steps with a purposeful stride; on the last step he tripped and fell flat on his face.

“Oh my, is he alright?” You asked as Prince Soma shrieked on the landing; Agni rushed to his aid and helped him stand. Prince Soma held his nose with one hand and looked at you through somewhat teary eyes.

You walked over to them with concern. “Hello Prince Soma, it’s an honor to meet you. You may want to put some ice on your nose before it begins to swell. Here.” You offered him your handkerchief as you saw a bit of blood seep from his nose; he took it with a sulky frown.

“Thank you.” Prince Soma held it to his nose gingerly while Agni went to fetch some ice.

“Do you still want to go on with today’s lesson your highness?” You asked as Prince Soma took a
seat; he looked up at you and nodded quickly.

“Yes, please teach me everything you know! I must learn many things, a little bump like this will not stop me!”

You smiled. “How tenacious. You’re very dedicated to your education.”

Prince Soma felt a pleased flush rise to his cheeks. “Y-yes. I must learn everything I can and that includes this country’s etiquette.”

“Prince Soma, here is the ice.” Agni had returned with a small bag; Prince Soma looked sheepish as he held it to his nose gingerly. “Is there anything else you need my prince?”

“No, no, everything’s fine Agni.” Prince Soma waved him off. “Please go on with your duties and leave us to the lesson.”

As Agni left the room with a deep bow, Prince Soma turned to you with a wide smile.

“Let the teaching commence!”

“Your highness, please concentrate.” You sighed for what seemed like the hundredth time; for two weeks now you had been trying to teach Prince Soma the basics of dinner time manners, but it seemed like he was zoning out with every other sentence.

“Can’t we take a break?” he requested; his head was sunken down on the table where he had been put to the task of arranging all the silverware correctly. “Why do I even need to learn this? Isn’t it a servant’s job to set the table?”

You crossed your arms and eyed him sternly. “Yes, but it is your duty to be aware of the proper placement even if you yourself are not setting up the display. You must know the right way so you will be able to tell if you’re using the proper utensils while eating.”

Prince Soma averted his gaze stubbornly. “I’m bored with this.”

“Prince Soma, if you are not going to take these lessons seriously, you are wasting both of our times.” You said thinly; you felt so disappointed, you thought he was excited to learn. Where was this apathy coming from?

“I am taking it seriously!” Prince Soma insisted; he looked down at the table in frustration. “I’m not good at this kind of thing, okay? I’m stupid and I don’t know how to do anything for myself and I won’t ever be able to remember this!”

His expression was so sad, your irritation gave way to sympathy; you pulled out a chair and sat next to him. He looked up at you almost shyly, a bit ashamed at his outburst.

“You are not stupid. I knew that right away; not many people are so driven to improve themselves.” You smiled warmly. “Your highness, you just need to have more confidence; if you’re having trouble understanding, tell me. I’m here to help you.”
“You are?” Prince Soma asked quietly; his eyes were shining with what you assumed was renewed enthusiasm.

“Yes.” You smiled and put a hand on his shoulder briefly before standing up. “Now, shall we continue the lesson?”

Prince Soma nodded, his eyes never leaving yours. “Yes!”

A few months passed by and you couldn’t be prouder of your student; Prince Soma was a quick learner when he put his mind to the task at hand. You had effectively taught him the proper etiquette for greeting others, mealtimes, and party events. Of course, it wasn’t that smooth a transition; Prince Soma could get distracted easily and he was a bit clumsy when he was flustered, but his determination got him through it. You learned something new about him everyday and soon saw there was much more to him than a ditzy palace brat.

Prince Soma had noticed many things about you as well.

He appreciated your patience and the way you kept him in line; you were more than his tutor, you were becoming his friend. All his insecurities seemed to not matter when you were there; he felt like he could do anything with your support, with you by his side, with your adorable smile lighting his world.

“Um, am I doing this correctly?” Prince Soma asked nervously as he placed one hand on your waist hesitantly.

You nodded encouragingly. “Now you take my hand; remember, it’s your job to lead.”

Prince Soma looked down as his feet moved stiffly to the slow waltz; you giggled in amusement.

“You need to keep your eyes on your partner Prince Soma.” You told him; your straightened out his shoulders and raised his chin. “There, just let your feet move with the music. You already know the technique, you just need to employ it.”

You didn’t seem to notice his fierce blush at your touch.

“Her hand is so soft...she smells lovely...we’re way too close!” As nervous as he felt, Prince Soma couldn’t tear his eyes away from your face; his feet moved in time to the music, but he barely heard it.

“I don’t want this to ever end.” Prince Soma carefully moved around the room, his hands holding you a bit more firmly now; he was lost in his own thoughts, lost in your kind gaze. You smiled up at him, whispering encouragement and complimenting his grace; he felt his heart swell at your approval.

“She really does like me.” Prince Soma realized as the music stopped; he didn’t pull away, just stared into your eyes fixedly.

You looked at him strangely. “Your highness, are you well? You seem a bit dazed.”

“Yes I am quite well!” Prince Soma ssured you with a goofy smile; you blinked and found yourself smiling back.

“Well, your performance is nearly perfect! After a few more days, our lessons will be complete and you will be a full fledged member of English society!” You clasped your hands together excitedly; you were surprised to see Prince Soma’s face falling.
“What? You mean, you won’t be teaching me anymore?”

“Well, no Prince Soma, there’s nothing else I can teach you after this.” You smiled at him widely.
“What’s with the long face? You should be proud of yourself.”

Your happy expression turned to worry as tears pricked the corners of Prince Soma’s eyes.

“What’s wrong?” You asked; he retracted his hands, his head hung and avoiding your stare.

“You can’t leave…” Prince Soma said softly. “Please, stay here…with me. Be my wife.”

You gasped as you found yourself in a tight embrace.

“I’ve fallen for you; surely you feel the same? You don’t really want to leave, don’t you?” Prince Soma held you tighter, his sorrowful tears falling into your hair.

“I’m sorry your highness, but I think there’s been a misunderstanding.” You told him feeling a bit panicked; what happened to the happy go lucky young man you had come to know? “It’s not that I don’t care for you, but love? I simply don’t feel that way at all.”

“I’m going to lose her.” Prince Soma thought desolately; he could already feel the warmth you had instilled into his soul leaving him slowly at your words of rejection. “No. I can’t lose another person I love!”

“Prince Soma, I think I should be leaving.” You said quietly but firmly. “This is completely inappropriate.”

“I won’t let you go!” Prince Soma cried; one of his hands went to your hair, the fingers tangled in the strands as he claimed your lips. Your arms were trapped to your sides; he wasn’t even fazed by your feeble struggling.

After what seemed like a lifetime, he pulled away with a radiant smile; you turned away from him defiantly, still trying to free yourself.

“You can stay here with me. You could have anything you want.” Prince Soma told you as he kissed your temple. “All you have to do is give me your love.”

“I don’t love you!”

Prince Soma’s smile faltered brokenly; his eyes searched yours desperately before they narrowed into slits.

“Than I will keep you here until you do!”

Without warning, he pressed his fingers into the back of your neck; in an instant you were unconscious and hanging limply from his arms.

“I suppose I really am still the selfish prince I was.” Prince Soma sighed as he held you close to him; his expression was blissfully content. “I’m sorry, but I don’t care. I want you. You’ll grow to be happy here I’m sure.”

He held you more securely, cradling you like a princess.

“But she is.” Prince Soma’s smile was full of almost childish innocence as he carried you to to his room. “My own princess.”
Alois Trancy

“Maid!” Lord Trancy barked at you as he left his chambers; you stood to attention. “Go in there and clean up the boy.”

You looked on as he walked away, a satisfied smile on his face; the only thing that made you sicker was the sight of Alois lying limp and battered on the bed. He was staring up at the ceiling blankly; a spider web was hanging in the corner, delicate and freshly spun. As you helped Alois up, you made a note to dust it later.

The warm water rushed into the porcelain tub as you slowly lowered him in; he was about your age, but he was so frail and light, you felt as if he was much younger.

“Bend your head a bit dear.” You told him as you gently massaged soap into his hair; he did so without a word.

“For God’s sake, he’s just a boy. They all are.” You couldn’t keep your hands from trembling as your smoothed the rag over his wounds, the soap falling away to reveal his bruised skin. How tragic; he was so beautiful too.

Alois’s head rose stiffly to look at you; a flicker of emotion showed in his dead like gaze.

“Why you cryin’?”

“I-I’m sorry.” You lowered your head, hands gripping the tub’s edge. “I’m sorry I wish I could help you...if I even tried to help you escape, he probably kill us both. I’m so sorry…” You trailed off, biting back a sob as tears fell from your cheeks and into the water.

“Hoheo Tralana, Rondero Tarel.”

“W-what?” You looked up; a ghost of a smile was on his lips.

“I made a pact with a fairy.” Alois said softly; he sunk down in the water, almost looking peaceful. “A dark fairy, but still if it helps...so don’t cry alright?”

“Don’t strain yourself, just try to relax.” You said trying to not show your confusion. “What is he talking about? Has he gone mad? He seems so sure.”

Not long after that day, Lord Trancy made the strangest announcement; all the staff was to go on a two week holiday for all their hard work. He would have to let some of them go, and would make sure to give them notice and ample compensation in return to help them until they get gainful employment. As he made his speech, the whole staff noticed the new butler standing behind him. You had never seen a man with such a sharp, predatory gaze as Claude Faustus; Alois was standing there too, clean and well clothed, smiling brightly at his ‘father’.

Two weeks came and went, and you received a letter requesting you return to work as a scullery maid for the Trancy manor; it was signed Alois Trancy’s signature. It was already common knowledge by then that the previous earl had unexpectedly died from infection. With a buzzing nervousness in your chest, you left your home and went back to the manor, full of questions.

“He said he made a pact with a fairy.” You thought not for the first time since you left. “It’s all too odd, that evil man falling ill, the new butler...what in the world is going on?”
You were led into the newly refurbished mansion by three unfamiliar butlers, triplets who greeted you with courteous nods, but no words. They led you to the drawing room; Alois was reading through documents with a look of obvious distaste; Claude stood nearby dutifully as a maid with flowing hair set down a tea tray. You felt a stab of pity for her, as she looked very anxious and sad, staring timidly at the plush carpet.

“You came back!” Alois had caught sight of you and leaped up from his chair; with more poise he walked over to you and took your hand, pressing a chaste kiss to the knuckle. “Thank you very much for returning.”

“Lord Trancy, may I ask a question?” You spoke with a more respectful tone, conscious of your standing; Alois nodded with a benign smile.

“Have you rehired any of the other servants my lord? It’s just, I don’t see anyone else here.” You said. “Won’t it be hard to keep everything running with just six servants?”

“Five.” Alois corrected you; you blinked questioningly.

“Five?”

Alois nodded and took your hand once more. “Rest assured, everything is taken care of. Please follow me,” he grinned playfully. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Yes. Thank you my lord.” You smiled back tentatively; this was certainly not the broken young boy you had known. Regardless, there was something new in his eyes, something that made you wary.

You followed him all the way to the second floor down corridors and past dozens of rooms before coming to stop at the master bedroom.

“You sleep here?” You asked; Alois raised an eyebrow expectantly.

“Forgive me my lord.” You bowed. “I just thought...you wouldn’t want to come back here…”

Alois’s sharp gaze softened at your sad expression. “I understand, but remember, things are different now.” he beamed. “Come look!”

He opened the large doors; the room was unrecognizable, brightly lit with a gorgeous view of the gardens, soft pastels on the bed and sheer curtains. It looked wonderful and you could hardly believe the drastic change.

“How…?”

Alois just smiled. “It’s a pretty sight now, isn’t it? Do you like it?”

You blinked and nodded; you didn’t understand what he wanted you to do. “Yes. Do you want me to make the beds and change the sheets?”

“No silly, this is your room!” Alois laughed merrily. “You’ll be sharing it with me. I hope it suits the lady’s tastes.”

“But my lord, I’m your servant, to share your bed-!”

“Oh, these silly aristocratic rules.” Alois scoffed. “Besides, I didn’t call you back to work for me. You’re going to live here and keep me company.”

You gasped as he took both your hands with the utmost tenderness. “You were the only one who
showed me any kindness in that hell hole, the only one who cared...it’s been so long.” Alois seemed lost in his own thoughts as he gripped your hands painfully tight; suddenly he smiled. “But none of that matters now! Come, today’s lessons were so tedious, I feel in need of a nap.”

You tugged your hand away. “My lord, I don’t feel comfortable with this.”

“I don’t believe I asked you.”

You flinched at his steely tone; his childlike expression was replaced with a cold sneer. Alois forcibly dragged you to the bed, throwing you against the mattress.

“Why are you acting like this?! Stop it this instant!” he demanded as he pinned you to the bed; he looked torn between rage and anguish. To your shock, large tears began streaming down his face as he brushed back your hair with the utmost gentleness. “I thought you loved me…did you lie? Do you think I’m just some filthy, defiled brat?”

“Lord Trancy~”

“Don’t call me that!” Alois screamed. “I don’t want to share that title with that old shit!”

You gasped at his language, his wide smirk. “What’s wrong with him? I don’t understand what’s going through his head.”

It was getting hard trying to keep up with his mood swings; happy, sad, angry, depressed. Alois couldn’t control himself; he didn’t understand, why were you being so distant, so scared? You had cried for him before, him, some street rat you didn’t even know. He was trying to repay your kindness, trying to make you happy.

“Alois.” You began softly. “Please, let me go. I didn’t mean to upset you, I’ll just go and-”

“Shut up! I see what you’re doing, you’re trying to run off! You think I’m mad, you think I’m dirty and vile. Well too bad, you’re staying here whether you like it or not.” he said coldly; he threw off his boots and got under the covers, pulling you with him. Once again, his face was drawn down in a sad little smile.

“It won’t be so bad, will it?” Alois traced a finger down your cheek; you froze at his touch, trying to keep from running away right then. “You don’t really want to leave do you? It’s been so lonely since you left.”

Your fear gave way to pity. “Is this what I get for not helping him before? Is this the price I must pay for allowing so many to be violated and tortured by that man?”

“Don’t fret lovely. I’ll make sure you’re accommodated here.” Alois smiled slyly. “You’ll live as my very own pet. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

You quickly nodded at the slight hostility in his voice.

Alois nestled his head in the pillows. “Hold me.”

You obeyed; it was all you could do; Alois smiled and giggled as your hair tickled his nose. His arms were wrapped around you tightly; you thought of a small child crushing their beloved pet to death. He sighed and you lay limp in his hold.

“It’s so good be loved.”
“Get back here you thief!”

The baker ran after Joker, sweat rolling down his face from both the exertion and anger; while Joker was young, he still had the disadvantage of being malnourished and off balance. Only a few minutes later he fell, still clutching the loaf of bread under his arm; he moaned and grit his teeth from the impact.

You looked on across the street, your hand paused as you exchanged money for your produce; a few people had stopped to watch as the baker neared Joker, though most barely spared a glance. It wasn’t as if stealing wasn’t commonplace in this area, though you yourself felt a twinge of pity as the boy looked around, almost as if looking for a friendly face in the crowd.

“But there isn’t.” You thought bitterly. “If anyone cared to help the poor, he most likely wouldn’t have gotten to such a state in the first place.”

“Finally caught you!” the baker raised his club, breathing harshly. “This is the last time you steal from me boy!”

Joker simply closed his eyes and waited. “Whatever happens, I won’t let this go. I won’t!”

“Please, wait!”

The baker turned to you with a harsh glare. “This doesn’t concern you girl. This bloody thief needs to be dealt with in the proper way, and I’ll thank you to stay out of my business.”

“For god’s sake, where’s your compassion?” You retorted, torn between anger and sadness. “Is it not enough he’s starving and missing a limb?!”

“Listen here miss,” the baker’s voice was begrudgingly calmer. “Punks like him are hurting my business. I have to think of my own welfare, and I can’t have these cripples coming into my store and stealing my livelihood!”

“Please, if I pay for the bread, will you let him go?” You asked.

“He’ll just come again most likely.”

You stood your ground, looking up at him beseechingly; Joker’s eyes never left your face. The baker glared one last time in Joker’s direction before retracting his club with a heavy sigh.

“Fine. You can count yourself lucky boy that this woman was here. Next time I won’t hold back.”

“Thank you.” You smiled and handed him the money; the baker inclined his head and left without another word. You crouched down and tried to look at Joker’s face. “Are you alright? Are you hurt anywhere?”

Joker shook his head, still staring at you almost unseeingly. He slowly stood up, his arm aching from the awkward position he took to shield the now crushed bread, but it didn’t do much to snap him out of his state.

You smiled in relief and rummaged through your basket. “Good. Please take this. It’s not much, but I suppose it’s better than nothing.”
Joker felt you push a few bills and your bag of groceries into his hands.

“Take care sir.” You waved and turned away, feeling a bit sad still; you were well aware that what you gave him wouldn’t last long at all, but you couldn’t very well take a strange man into your own home. Yet...

“Perhaps I should contact Baron Kelvin.” You thought suddenly feeling your spirits lift. “He’s always willing to take in the less fortunate, and I’m sure that boy would be much happier in his work house.”

So many years later Joker had grown up strong and healthy, only to find himself trapped; he had been found happiness that once seemed unattainable and then it had been taken away from him, leaving he and his surrogate family to suffer and the darkness looming over them spread to every town they visited. If only things were different; while they had the means to live their own lives far from Baron Kelvin’s reach, Joker couldn’t bring himself to do so.

“At least at times like this, it’s almost like we’re simply circus folk.” Joker smiled broadly for the audience as Beast and Betty took center stage, the perfect combination of beauty and beast. Joker could see the sadness behind her confident gaze and once again found himself wishing things were different.

“But then we would’ve died in the streets.” Joker reminded himself grimly. “Father was kind enough to take us in, make our bodies whole again. No one has ever been so good to us.”

Once again, he was reminded of you, one of the few people he wished he could be loyal to, but he didn’t even know where you were and it had been so long since then, he doubted he’d ever even see you again. Joker liked to imagine what would have occurred if Kelvin hadn’t found him and his family. Perhaps you would’ve returned to the area; he had never even gotten the chance to thank you, his mind was so frazzled.

Perhaps he would’ve been able to get you know you; you seemed like such a good person, strong willed for a woman with so much compassion. Maybe you would’ve even grown to care for him.

“How silly. But isn’t that just like people, always wanting more.” Joker applauded as Beast had Betty jump through a series of obstacles; the crowd went absolutely wild as she jumped through the rings of fire, it was a wonder the tiger wasn’t feeling overwhelmed by the noise. “Besides, a destitute cripple with no money and a tarp instead of a roof? Not suitable for any person, let alone a lady.”

Joker pushed aside these musings for what must have been the hundredth thousandth time. Now wasn’t the time to be distracted. The show must go on.

“Now ladies and gents, for this next act, we need a volunteer! Remember, we aren’t liable for any accidents!” Joker winked teasingly; despite the light atmosphere, a few people shuffled nervously in their seats.

“Ah, I see this brave young woman raising her hand!” Joker called out gleefully. “Please step up and-”

You smiled up at him as he beckoned you up to the stage.

“-stand near Beast.” Joker place his prosthetic hand on your shoulder; you didn’t even seem to notice, your gaze was now fixed on Betty and her bared fangs.
“Oh dear.” You smiled anxiously as Beast instructed you to sit on a chair and tied your arms behind your back tightly. “She’s a lot bigger up close.”

“Don’t worry bout a thing, just stay calm and trust me.” Beast said kindly; she raised her whip and cracked it into the air. Betty sat at attention, her mouth closed, bright eyes studying Beast attentively. There was a silence as Beast waited for Joker to introduce her act.

“Joker?” Beast looked over at him just in time to see Joker turn away back to the audience. “He shoulda been halfway through his bit now…”

“Our professional tamer of wild beasts will now demonstrate the highly dangerous “Man vs. Beast” act!” Joker chuckled heartily. “Or should I say, “Betty vs. Beast”?”

The audience laughed and the stage crew began to erect a large cage around you and Beast, effectively trapping you both inside with Betty.

“This beautiful young lady will serve as the ‘bait’. Beast will attempt to distract Betty and lead her out of this cage and back into her own.”

The smaller tiger compartment was rolled over to one end of the cage; you looked back and forth between Beast, Betty, and the other entrance on the opposite end of the cage. It was locked from the outside. Joker stood behind it, his skeletal hand twirling the key ring around one finger playfully.

“There, there love, no need for worries!” Joker called out to you; it was all he could do to keep himself from slamming open the door, retracting the knife in his hand-made arm, and cutting you loose. “Beast is a professional, and if anything goes amiss, I got the key righ’ here!”

You nodded, feeling a bit more reassured; Beast circled around Betty, whip poised in hand. She ordered Betty to do a series of tricks; the main trick was that the tiger was suppose to ignore the live meat trapped in her close vicinity, and so far, Betty had made no move to harm you. As Beast had her stand and walk briefly on two legs, the crowd screamed in amazement and excitement; suddenly, the fur on the back of Betty’s spine rose up, her eyes flashing.

Beast’s own stare narrowed. “Betty, I said come!” she commanded sharply.

The sound of the whip cracked like lightning, but did nothing to sway Betty’s attention; she was too distracted, too nervous, and Beast hadn’t perfected teaching her how to ignore other distractions during a performance.

You stared almost blankly as Betty advanced toward you slowly, ready to pounce.
“......help.” You felt tears sting your eyes, your lower lip tremble as you stared directly into the gaze of the predatory beast.

“Don’t move.”

Joker ordered calmly; the ropes fell around you. You looked over your shoulder as he gripped onto your arm and quickly carried you out of the steel cage. Beast had hit Betty with the tip of the whip, finally catching her attention.

“Betty, back!” Beast cried out; Betty retreated into her cage with a somehow subdued look. Your shoulders were still shaking slightly as the crowd slowly filed out of the big top tent; you yourself had been led to the hospital tent, a wheelchair bound doctor giving you a hot cup of tea; the cup rattled against the small plate as you tried to steady your hand.

“Thank you very much.” You smiled weakly,

He nodded sympathetically. “It’s the least we can do. You could’ve been mangled if Joker hadn’t stepped in earlier.”

You both jumped slightly as Joker burst in through the tent; Beast followed behind him closely along with Dagger, who seemed to be having a one-sided argument with Joker, who ignored him and immediately went to your side.

“Are you okay? Are ya hurt?” Joker asked softly; you shook your head hurriedly and he gave a small sigh of relief before rounding on Beast. “What happened back there?”

“Betty got distracted by the crowd-!” Beast was cut off by Joker’s piercing glare.

“You are our beast tamer. It’s your job to make sure Betty is trained proper like.”

“Hold on just a second, it’s not Beast’s fault, it was an accident!” Dagger leapt to her defense.

“Besides, no one got hurt.”

“That’s enough Dagger.” Beast frowned at the ground; after second she turned to face you with an apologetic look. “Joker’s right. I’m sorry miss.”

“It’s quite fine, it was amazing you were able to tame her to such an extent.” You smiled reassuringly and turned to Joker. “Thank you so much, you saved a perfect stranger’s life today.”

Joker’s smile faltered a bit before assuming it’s usual cheerfulness. “Of course! You were a regular damsel in distress you were; perhaps we should hire you as a lovely assistant!”

The doctor laughed at the decreased tension. “Let’s all just be grateful nothing too bad happened.”

“Well, thank you all for your concern, but I should go.” You got up and the doctor took your cup; Joker wanted to scream.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Dagger asked you, studying your face curiously. “You look pale as a ghost.”

You truthfully did feel somewhat shaky, but already felt a bit guilty for the fuss. “I’ll be fine, nothing a good night’s sleep won’t fix. I’ll just go check into a inn and-“
“Nonsense!” Joker exclaimed. “We have plenty of room here; call it repayment for this whole mishap.”

You looked at them all tentatively. “Well...if you insist, I’d be very grateful.”

After a minute of reassurances, Joker was leading you to your lodging.

“She doesn’t remember me.” Joker thought as you walked beside him making polite conversation.
“But this...this is a sign. After all these years, after these doubts I’ve been having, here she shows up out of nowhere!”

The coincidence was too much to ignore; it had to mean something.

Besides, even after his heart had become colder, he couldn’t find it in himself to stop loving you.

“I hope this isn’t any trouble.” You looked up at him questioningly. “To be honest, I really am relieved, it would’ve been hard to find a free room tonight, so many people are in town for your show.”

“Ya don’t say!” Joker chuckled. “I take it you’re not from around here then?”

“No, I came here for the show too, but to be truthful, I’m about as much of a resident as anyone else here.” You replied; Joker cocked his head to the side quizzically. “Well, my work requires me to travel from town to town, but I thought I’d pop in and see the circus while I had the chance.”

“Oh, and what be your business?”

“I work as a representative for the Women’s Committee for Children in Poverty; we try to help wherever we can. It really is a shame, seeing as how there’s been so many child kidnappings. Chances are, many of them are children wandering the streets with no family or home for refuge.” You explained sadly.

“I see.”

“Honestly, it’s been years since I could call one place my hometown.”

Joker walked a bit slower. “Does your husband approve of you being gone so long?”

“Oh, I’m not married!” You laughed carelessly.

“What about family?”

“I haven’t been in contact for a very long time.” You shrugged. “We’ve never been very close you see...I’m sorry, am I boring you? I’m afraid my conversation isn’t very stimulating, I’m feeling a bit off-”

“Absolute nonsense.” Joker told you softly. “Please come this way.”

“Oh my.” You said; the tent was huge and well furnished, much nicer than the previous tents you passed by.

“Is it to the ladies standards?” Joker’s tone was playful, but he couldn’t help regarding you a bit worriedly. He hoped you approved.

“It’s lovely.” You beamed.
“Good.” Joker felt his face relax into a genuine smile. “I need to ask you something.”

“What?”

“Do you remember helping a poor cripple who tried to get away with stealing bread? Do you remember standing up for that gutter rat when everyone else turned a blind eye? Do you remember giving him money, food, and a glimmer of hope that the world wasn’t as awful a place as it seemed?”

“I…” You peered closely at his face. “How do you-?”

“I was that thief.”

Joker slowly pulled off part of his prosthetic; your face was an expression of shock as he undid his jacket. His arm was gone, just like that boy’s.

“It’s you.” You said in a near whisper. “I always wondered what had happened to you.”

“You did?” Joker popped his arm back in, his eyes hopeful. You nodded with a slightly bewildered little smile.

“I can’t believe after all these years… I’m so glad to see you’re doing well!”

Joker’s smile was so bitterly sad, it made you immediately concerned.

“I never forgot about you either.” he confessed, drawing closer to you. “I’ve been waiting so long for something, anything to turn this life I’ve been leading around. You being here after all this time is a sign.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I love you.” Joker took your hands in his, the cold smoothness of his skeletal hand making you wince. “Stay here. You don’t have a home to call your own, this place could be your home. We could always use an extra helping hand, and we travel from town to town, so you could still do your charity work.”

The speech came spilling out before he could even stop himself, the words stumbling over in an excited undertone. Joker looked into your eyes expectantly.

“I-I really think I should be going now.” You backed away and looked for the exit.

“No!” Joker blocked the tent’s opening. “I won’t let you. I’ve waited too long, I was a right fool to let you go and I’m not doin’ it again!”

“Joker, please, this is completely inappropriate!” You were looking for an escape, but to your surprise, Joker stepped aside.

“I understand.” he said disappointedly. “I’m sorry I made you uncomfortable. Please, you still look ill. Stay here for the night, I’ll leave you be. It’s the least I can do for what you did for me.”

“Alright.” You stared after him warily as Joker left the tent, feeling a stab of pity on the sadness etched on his face.

As you drifted off to sleep, Joker was entering the doctor’s tent.

“Joker, back again? Is the young lady feeling worse?”
“No she’s getting her sleep. But I need your help with something.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow at Joker’s wicked smile. “What would that be?”

“Just a wee bit of surgery…”

You woke up with a gasp, your vision slightly blurred; your head ached.

“My face stings” You slowly opened your eyes; you were no longer in Joker’s tent. You were lying on a medical cot, a bright light shining over head.

“I’m so glad you’re up!” Joker greeted you; you could vaguely see his form sitting by your bed. “I was worried the good doctor might’ve given you too much of that medication. It was supposed to dull any pain, but you should still be careful.”

Joker was just glad he could dispose of the doctor before you had woken up; his body was already being transported by his troupe to Baron Kelvin’s mansion. He certainly hoped he would get the message; they would no longer be his pawns.

“Joker?” You asked softly trying to sit up. “What…?”

“Look here love.” Joker held out a small mirror to you with an ecstatic grin. “I personally think the design to be quite classy, very detailed.”

You screamed and the mirror was sent crashing into the ground, the glass shattering. Joker looked at you questioningly.

“What, ya don’t like it?”

They were facial tattoos, woven around your eyes, your cheeks, all the way to your ears and neck; the ink was pitch black, the lines delicate and making spiraling patterns. There was a illustration of stitches around your number lips. Perhaps on a curtain or a piece of pottery it would be considered a fine work of art as Joker intended, but to have such a thing disfiguring a young lady’s face. To put it lightly, you were unrecognizable.

“I won’t even be able to go outside.” Your tears were stinging the freshly made markings, making you whimper in pain.

“Don’t be silly!” Joker laughed easily as wrapped one arm around your shoulders. “You’ll be part of our act! We may have to teach you a thing or two, but you can also help out backstage. You’re one of us!”
Joker felt his heart swell in his chest. You looked gorgeous; maybe regular society would shun you, but you would soon see you would find closer and more dependable friends in him and his family. He was musing on your new name as you stared down at the sheets in horror.

“Let’s see, what should be your stage name…?”

Joker studied your new face; he had partially been inspired by some tribal figurines brought some of the new stage hands had brought over; they were from foreign countries and had brought some sort of odd dolls along with them. They were said to be able to curse and Joker was reminded of the English poppet.

“That’s perfect!” Joker said quietly; he held you close as you shook. “My little Poppet. Don’t worry, the pain should dull eventually.”

Now you had no choice; you wouldn’t be acceptable anywhere else, he had made sure of that.

“Everything’s going to be okay now.” Joker kissed the top of your head as he sighed. “We’ve made it over the hill, and I’m taking you with me.”
“Lady Elizabeth!” you smiled widely and curtsied. “How wonderful to see you again, you came at a perfect time!”

To your surprise, Elizabeth crossed her arms and pouted. “Honestly, how many times do I have to say it?!”

“My lady?”

“Call me Lizzy!” Elizabeth stamped her foot lightly; you blinked in slight confusion. “Lady Elizabeth is far too formal….”

“Oh, right.” You smiled apologetically. “Forgive me, but I just don’t feel very accustomed to it. Besides, you’re more than deserving of such a respectful title.”

Elizabeth’s pout dissolved into a grin. “Well, anyway, do tell; why is now the perfect time?”

“For starters, I think you’ll really enjoy these new hair pins; they’re imported from Spain and they have just the right mix of bright colors and subtle, delicate designs and exotically cut jewels!” You directed her to a polished glass case and Elizabeth sighed in awe at the accessories, her own gem like eyes widening in delight at the display.

“Oh Ciel, aren’t these simply lovely? Just look at the richness of this blue!” Elizabeth turned to Ciel, who wore a frankly disinterested expression; he hadn’t even bothered to greet you, but you were used to his somewhat standoffish nature.

“Yes, indeed.” Ciel replied distractedly; he nodded to you politely. “I must say, you have a good eye for detail.”

“Thank you my lord.” You nodded back. “We try to sell only the best. In fact, there’s something I’ve been meaning to show you Lady-um, Lizzy…” you felt uneasy addressing Elizabeth so familiarly, but her fond smile helped your nerves as you carefully took out a velvet case from under the counter.

“This is a simply, yet elegant pin that is rumored to have belonged to Marie Antoinette herself.” You explained excitedly as you unlocked the lid and pried it open. “The shade of green matches your eyes perfectly Lizzy, though I wanted to make sure it was properly cleaned and polished before presenting it to-oh hello Sebastian” You greeted the servant as he sidled up next to Ciel’s side, a neatly wrapped package under one arm, assumingly from running another errand for his master. “You’re just in time! I was just about to show Lady Elizabeth a new pin that I think she’d find most adequate.”

“Oh dear.” Sebastian was looking at the case with a slight frown. “I don’t suppose you forgot which case you had kept it in?”

“What do you-?” You nearly dropped the velvet box in shock; it was empty.

“Oh my!” Elizabeth exclaimed as your expression turned from excited to distressed. “Someone stole it!”

“No, that can’t be.” You told her; you crouched down to search through the secret compartment under the display counter. “I keep this locked up at all times; no one else even knows about it and I’m the only one with a key.”
Ciel stepped around the counter to help you examine the drawer. “Are you quite certain? Perhaps one of your employees saw where you had hidden it?”

“No, when I brought the pin in here I was the only one present.” You answered; eventually you straightened up and looked at Elizabeth sadly. “I’m sorry my lady, I got your hopes up for nothing.”

“Don’t apologize!” Elizabeth said fiercely. “You shouldn’t feel sorry that some awful thief stole away your merchandise. Ciel,” she turned to her fiance with a pleading look. “You and Sebastian can help figure out who did it can’t you? What if they come back or what if they had tried to harm her?”

Ciel’s focused glare softened at Elizabeth’s words. “Of course, if would be dishonorable not to help a friend of my lady’s.” he choked slightly as Elizabeth threw her arms around his neck; you could see Sebastian’s shoulders shake with silent mirth at the scene.

“Elizabeth please!” Ciel exclaimed as he gently pushed her away; he turned back to you with an almost sheepish frown. “Tell me, are you quite certain you didn’t misplace it?”

“Yes.” You told him firmly. “I would never be so careless with such a valuable item. I keep the key with me at all times and I can’t see how anyone else would even know about it even being in my possession, let alone where I hid it.”

Ciel raised his hand to his chin thoughtfully. “A pin of that notoriety simply doesn’t arrive in a shop without someone knowing; while you may have concealed its existence from your employees and other customers, it’s still highly possible that someone who helped transport it here, someone who keeps tabs on the comings and goings of such items would know.”

“If I may,” Sebastian interjected. “You said you had it cleaned and polished until it was ready for Lady Elizabeth, correct?”

“Yes.” You didn’t bother to wonder how he had known you had said that when he wasn’t even present at the time.

“Hm, I see.” Sebastian nodded to himself. “I don’t suppose you did it yourself?”

“Oh no, I usually do, but I felt unsure about restoring something so precious myself; I ended up taking it to a man who specializes in cleaning more antique jewels and softer metals.” You looked back at the empty case. “You don’t suppose…?”

“I think it’s highly possible the man you took the pin to for cleaning is our thief.” Ciel answered shortly. “He may not have known exactly where you had hidden it, but he did know it was in your care. I assume he could easily figure out where your shop is? It would’ve just been a matter of coming in at a time you weren’t here and picking the lock.”

You put a hand to your cheek. “How could I be so careless?!”

“Don’t you dare blame yourself!” Elizabeth cried out.

“She’s right.”

You looked at Ciel with mild shock at his kind tone of voice. “You should not feel guilty for the crimes and dishonesty of others; you simply made the mistake of placing your trust in the wrong person. To be safe, me and Sebastian will do some investigating. Come.” Ciel ordered Sebastian and began walking out the door. “Elizabeth, forgive me for cutting our outing short.”
“No, the sooner you solve this case the better.” Elizabeth insisted; she turned to you with a bright smile. “Don’t worry about a thing dear, the Queen’s guard dog always finds the culprit; you’ll have your pin back in no time!”

“Yes…” You smiled back appreciatively and bowed to them. “Thank you my lord. I will be in your debt for this.”

Ciel waved your words away with his hand and Sebastian simply smiled as they took their leave. Once you and Elizabeth were out of earshot, Sebastian spoke freely.

“This matter could be left to the Yard my lord.” he said as he opened the carriage door with a bow. “Surely they can sort it out themselves; it’s already obvious the jewel cleaner is the thief.”

“Are you questioning me?”

Sebastian’s smile never wavered, even at Ciel’s withering look. “Of course not my lord. I only mean such a trivial task is above you. I’m quite surprised you agreed to even get involved.”

“My motives and actions are none of your concern. You are to obey me as long as you are under contract, not make assumptions of what I should or shouldn’t be doing.” Ciel looked out the window and dismissed Sebastian.

“How interesting.” Sebastian gracefully sat on the driver’s seat and took a hold of the horse’s reins. “My young master can be so fickle and full of surprises even now.”

“Sebastian,” Ciel called from the window sharply before the horses began their journey. “You are not to act on your own during this investigation. I will accompany you to interrogate this man and you will protect me if the confrontation becomes violent. He will pay for his crimes.”

Sebastian hid his smirk at the way Ciel’s hand curled tightly around his cane, a movement so imperceptible anyone else wouldn’t have been able to notice.

“Yes my lord.”
“Mister Samuel Deadman?” Ciel read Sebastian’s report aloud with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes my lord, he is now the current owner of Harding’s Jewels and Antiques on the other side of town. The shop was established thirty four years ago by Mister Abraham Harding; he has been dead for the past five years. He left the shop to Deadman, and since the shop changed hands, business has been steadily declining.”

“Deadman?” Ciel questioned. “Surely that can’t be his real surname?”

“On the contrary my lord, Samuel Deadman’s previous trade was a grave digger; the surname is rooted in such a line of work.” Sebastian explained; he seemed quite delighted to be telling his master something he didn’t already know. “For generations they have been grave diggers, but I suppose Mister Deadman preferred a less...gruesome career.”

Ciel gazed at Sebastian soberly; he sensed his butler was having a bit too much fun with this matter.

“So a new jeweler shop opens up and the owner brings to him a rare jewel for cleaning. She wanted to make sure the jewel was properly cleaned for Lady Elizabeth, and so she made the mistake of leaving the task up to her rival, whom she believed had more expertise in the matter. A careless move, no doubt the second he found out, Mister Deadman made plans to steal it; he’ll likely attempt to sell it in the underground market so the crime can’t be traced back to himself.”

Sebastian carefully placed a saucer of freshly brewed tea on Ciel’s desk along with a small plate of biscuits. “I must say, I find it hard to believe it never even crossed her mind that she would be the victim of theft. Did she assume because he was in the same business that meant they had a semblance of camaraderie? Humans can be so gullible, it’s nothing short of miraculous some manage to survive in this world as long as they do.”

“We’ll leave tonight. Harding’s Jewels and Antiques has upper lodgings area where he resides, correct? We’ll arrive to deal with him personally after the shop is closed.”

“If I may be so bold as to ask why you want to come with my lord? It’s my duty as your servant to assure you get enough rest to go about your daily activities. You need not stay up, simply drift off to sleep and allow me to carry out the plan in your stead.” Sebastian’s eyes flickered for a moment; as boring as it could be to deal with his lord’s tedious games, there was something about this situation that peaked his interest. To get personally involved in such a small matter, one his master would normally leave up to him….perhaps his confidence in Sebastian’s skills was wavering? Was it to keep up his pledge to the Queen? Was it for Lady Elizabeth’s sake so she wouldn’t have to worry her head over her friend’s woes? Or was it something else entirely?

“I believe I stated beforehand that it was none of your business.” Ciel sipped his tea and nodded his approval. “My reasons are my own and I am not under any obligation to divulge them to you every time you feel curious. All you need to do is obey my orders.”

“Of course my lord, how impertinent of me.” Sebastian bowed lowly. “Shall I make the preparations for our visit to Mister Deadman’s abode?”

“Yes, do so at once.”

Sebastian rose from his bow and took his leave, but before he could open the door, Ciel’s short chuckle stopped him in his tracks.
“Hm. Mister Samuel Deadman….” Ciel studied the report idly, his lips curving into a faint smirk. “What a fitting name, wouldn’t you agree Sebastian?”

“Certainly my lord.”

Ciel’s expression grew grave once more at the flicker that went through his butler’s gaze. “Don’t just stand there. See to your chores won’t you?”

“Yes my lord, right away.”

Sebastian turned away before Ciel could catch his own eager smile.

Samuel Deadman was awoken by a chill; he looked over to his window and saw it was blown open by the cool autumn breeze. He cursed quietly and padded over on the cold wooden floor to shut it close firmly.

“If I had enough money I would be able to afford to get that damned lock fixed.” he thought as he sat back down on his bed. No matter; he would soon have the fortune he seeked as soon as he got in contact with the right buyer for his jewel.

“Just fixing a lock? Surely you have more grandiose ideas for what you will spend your ill gotten gain on?”

Samuel nearly choked on his own scream as he bolted out of bed; the window was blown wide open and standing on the sill was a strange man. A man in a fine butler suit; as if this picture wasn’t already odd, the butler was carrying a small boy dressed as a nobleman in his arms. The butler set the boy down effortlessly and began to speak as if Samuel was not even present.

“Young master, are you quite sure you want to dirty your hands with this wretched human’s blood?”

The butler didn’t spare Samuel a glance as he gracefully came down from his perch; he was quite certain he didn’t even see the butler step down. It was as if he had just floated, but that couldn’t be right. None of this could be right.

“Who the hell are you people!?” Samuel’s voice rose more in fear than anger. “Leave my home at once or I’ll call the police!”

“A thief has no right to rely on authorities.”

The boy’s voice was clearly prepubescent; he was slight, frail really, but his words cut through Samuel as if spoken by a man twice his size.

“I--what are you talking about boy?! I didn’t steal anything, you are trespassing on private property-”

“Marie Antoinette’s hairpin belongs to your rival, does it not?” the boy continued coldly; his eyes narrowed as if he had just caught side of a particularly disgusting insect. “Sebastian, why not show Mister Deadman what you found locked away in his study?”

The butler removed the evidence from his waist coat, the jewel shining clearly in the dim light of the room; Samuel’s eyes grew wider.

“What, are you cops?” his eyes darted to his left; the shotgun was under his bed, but if he was quick enough-
“Oh my.” Sebastian said suddenly. “Were you really going to attempt to harm the Earl of the Phantomhive household? Putting that aside, what man would point a rifle at a child? Young master, whatever should we do?”

“Sebastian, I want you to get rid of that rifle as soon as we’re done here.” Ciel answered curtly. “I will not need your assistance in this part.”

The barrel of the pistol shone as brightly as the jewel; the brief shock that a child could withdraw and aim the weapon so effortlessly went through Samuel’s mind before being replaced with blind terror.

“Please, don’t kill me!” Samuel didn’t dare reach out to the boy for fear of his butler still having a secure grip on his own rifle. “Look, I’m sorry, take the hairpin! I’ll turn myself in, I swear, j-just please!”

“Pathetic.” Ciel spat as he advanced toward the cowering adult. “I will not permit excuses and sniveling from criminals. You made the mistake of crossing me and I will not take that lying down.”

“You? My lord, if I did something to dishonor you-I didn’t know it was your jewel, I thought that stupid girl!”

“SHUT UP THIS INSTANT!”

Sebastian blinked; his master’s arm was shaking slightly, not from the fear of the situation, not out of second guessing whether or not to take another human being’s life; it was out of pure anger that he pressed his finger against the trigger, killing the man almost instantly. It was only when Ciel had seen the light completely leave Samuel’s eyes that his shaking ceased.

“Sebastian, I believe you know what to do next?”

“Yes…my lord.”

“What’s with that tone? Do you think I would feel an ounce of guilt from disposing of that-that-!”

“Of course not my lord.” Sebastian gently pried the pistol from Ciel’s hand. “I would never question the actions that make your soul that much more delectable. But I am curious: do you think she will love you for what you have done? Do you think she will thank you most ardently and see you as a hero? I never thought you could be so naive my lord. Surely you realize, you haven’t forgotten that your soul, your life, is no longer yours?”

Ciel simply glared at him dismissively. “I am quite aware. I know that when the terms of our contract is carried out, you will devour my soul for your next meal.”

“I will not live the long, carefree life my parents wanted. I will not grow old with the girl I’m betrothed to and have a family of my own; surely she and if my parents were alive, they would all be devastated; but I don’t care. The idea has been impossible since gone that night; I have made my decision and I do not regret it.”

Sebastian’s smile grew ever so slightly. “Even though you won’t have a future with her? Though you stand nothing to gain, except the blood of another human being on your hands, by the actions you have taken this night on her behalf?”

“That man crossed someone I hold dear; by extension, he has crossed me. I don’t particularly regret anything if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t expect a demon to fully comprehend the feelings of human beings; all you understand is your hunger it seems.” Ciel looked at Sebastian from the corner of his eye. “Perhaps it was more to assuage my own pride, but either way, she shall get her
merchandise back, Lady Elizabeth will have her gift returned, and a thief has been stopped. A happy end if there ever was one.”

Ciel shrugged as Sebastian lifted him into his arms and descended below to the waiting carriage; not a soul was out so late, and they had no worries of any witnesses. Sebastian would of course be sure to properly dispose of Samuel Deadman’s corpse accordingly, as soon as he got his young master to bed with a hot cup of milk.

“Hm, such a busy day and I still have to make preparations for breakfast and check tomorrow’s schedule.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage.” Ciel yawned as he was placed in the carriage’s seat carefully; as bored as his expression suggested, Sebastian could see he was quite content.

“Yes my lord.”
Sebastian Michaelis Pt. 1

You had heard that the road to hell was paved with good intentions.

“Excuse me young lord, I believe you dropped this.” You stood behind Ciel holding out his pocket watch; he took it with a look of mild surprise.

“Thank you. How careless of me.” Ciel commented as he stowed it away in his coat for safe keeping.

“It’s no trouble. I’d hate to lose something so pretty myself.” You smiled politely; you were on your way to the store when you noticed the shining watch lying in the dirt. As you scanned the area, you saw the aristocrat accompanied by his butler just a few feet ahead.

You had briefly toyed with the idea of keeping and selling it; after all, the nobles had so much money already, and here you were just getting by. Regardless of your need for money, you knew you’d just feel guilty later; a thief you were not.

“Well, have a nice day miss. Sebastian, when you are done shopping for groceries, wait out here.” Ciel ordered. “I will not be needing your help finding Lady Elizabeth’s gift.”

“Yes my lord.” Sebastian bowed slightly; after Ciel had gone into the dress shop, he smiled at you cordially.

“Pardon me miss, but would you happen to know where I could buy candy beetroot?” Sebastian inquired. “I’m afraid I am unfamiliar with this area and I simply must acquire the vegetable for my master’s dinner party.”

“Oh yes, go five shops down the road, take a right, then you-”

“Would you be so kind as to show me the way?” Sebastian requested with an almost bashful air.

You nodded. “Certainly sir, follow me, it shouldn’t take long.”

“Please, there’s no rush. That being said, there is no need to call me ‘sir’. I am simply one hell of a butler, not gentry of any sort.”

“Oh? You’re so refined though-um, I’m sorry, that was rude of me to just blurt out.” You apologized.

“Nonsense. I am merely a servant, and you need not use any formalities with me.” Sebastian assured you. “Call me by my name, won’t you?”

“Of course, Sebastian it is.” You nodded. “I was taught a lady shouldn’t use coarse or forward speech, though it doesn’t come easy to me. The skill of proper etiquette isn’t exactly my best quality.”

Sebastian smiled bemusedly. “No, that seems to be your kindness.”

“What?” You blinked feeling quite off guard.

“It’s easy to see. I’m sure most people would’ve just made off with my young master’s watch and thought nothing of it.”
“I did think of it though…” You confessed averting your eyes to the ground.

Sebastian nodded. “Yes, but you ultimately decided against it. Temptation can be quite hard to resist, but you stuck to your morals like the good girl you are.”

You couldn’t help chuckling slightly. “Huh, it’s as if you knew what I was thinking the whole time or something.”

He merely smiled and it filled you with an odd feeling.

“A butler, huh?” You watched absently as Sebastian looked through the markets produce carts. “He seems so dignified…but something’s...off.”

You tried to study him discreetly; you prided yourself on your good instincts, but for once, they were failing you.

“How stupid, he’s just a servant, one of the common folk working under nobility.” You told yourself; still, there was something about his manner that made you uneasy. It was helpful and polite, yet you couldn’t help feel as if he was mocking you, simply playing the role of the subservient butler.

“Would you do me the honor of escorting me to my young master? I can’t seem to recall the way back.” Sebastian stepped over to you with his purchases.

“No problem; do you need help carrying those?”

“Ah, there’s that charming sweetness.” Sebastian smiled down at you knowingly; you wondered if he could tell what you were thinking. “Please, don’t worry yourself over a lowly servant.”

“Lowly is the last thing you are, and I’m pretty sure you know it.”

Instead of voicing your accusations, you led him back to the dress shop; Ciel was waiting outside impatiently with a package.

“About time.”

“Forgive me my lord, I’m afraid it would’ve taken much longer if this young lady hadn’t accompanied me.”

Ciel frowned dismissively and handed Sebastian the package. “Come, we still have many preparations to make for tonight’s ball.”

“My lord?”

“What is it?” Ciel sighed impatiently.

“May I be so bold as to invite the young lady to the party? I will see that she has the appropriate attire.” Sebastian turned to you. “I wager you don’t own any gowns for formal events yourself?”

“No, but you don’t have to-”

Ciel cut you off. “I don’t see why not.” he faced you directly. “As the head of the Phantomhive household, I implore you to attend my fiance, Lady Elizabeth’s, birthday celebration. The party is at seven this evening; please do not be late.”

“T-thank you young lord. I will arrive on time.” You curtsied deeply; Ciel nodded and made his way to the carriage. “Come Sebastian.”
“I look forward to your presence at tonight’s festivities my lady. Until then.” Sebastian bowed deeply and left you with a coy smile. You bowed back, torn between delight at being invited to such an event and suspicion.

You looked on as Sebastian entered the carriage with Ciel and the carriage took off. “Why would he...?”

“Sebastian.”

“Yes my lord?”

Ciel studied him shrewdly. “Do you know that woman?”

“No my lord, I have never seen her until today.”

“Yet you take it upon yourself to invite her to the party. Hmph, you’re pretty presumptuous for a butler.” Ciel drawled. Sebastian looked right back, completely unfettered.

“She was kind enough to return your pocket watch and assist me in finding an ingredient for this evening’s dinner. I merely felt it necessary as a servant of the Phantomhive manor and your butler to thank her properly.”

“Whatever. Just remember our contract; you fulfill my orders before going off galavanting.” Ciel yawned.

Sebastian’s smile was humble, but there was no mistaking a trace of triumph.

“Yes, my lord.”
“Good evening my lady, you’re just in time.” Sebastian held open the door of the Phantomhive manor for you; you curtsied and looked around in awe.

“Oh, it’s beautiful…” You marveled at the high ceilings; whichever way you looked, there were flowers and streamers. You could hear the faint sound of merrymaking in another part of the mansion.

“The other servants and I have prepared only the best for Lady Elizabeth.” Sebastian explained. “Please follow me to the changing room; I have a gown prepared for you. If it isn’t the right size, there are many others you can choose from.”

“Why are there so many?” You asked curiously; after all, from what you knew, the Earl of Phantomhive lived alone inside the manor. “Certainly they’re not for your master?”

Sebastian grinned in amusement. “We like to be prepared for anything. In addition, many of the gowns are special presents from other companies who wanted to gain financial favors from the young master. They were meant to be given to Lady Elizabeth, but she has a particular sense of fashion that they have neglected to adhere to, so we just put them away.”

“Didn’t he buy her a dress himself for her birthday? He must know her very well to be so confident in his choice of clothing for his fiance.” You commented with a small smile.

“Yes, the young master is quite fond of her despite his moody exterior.” Sebastian looked down at you pointedly. “If a man is to win his lady’s affections, shouldn’t he do everything he can to woo her?”

“I suppose so…” You trailed off; you were suddenly very aware of his gaze. To your astonishment and slight irritation, it took the two of you nearly half an hour to reach the guest room. You were breathing a bit heavily by the time Sebastian stopped in front of a large oak door. Inside was a made bed and some furniture; the whole room looked untouched and unused. A stunning dress was laid out with a pair of matching shoes.

“I will leave you to try it on. Please, take your time.” Sebastian was halfway out the door before stopping to address you. “How thoughtless of me! I only just recalled you’ve never worn such a garment. Perhaps you need assistance?”

“No, thank you.” You let out a relieved breath and changed as quickly as you could.

“Wow...I barely recognize myself…”

You started at a light knock on the door.

“Are you done changing my lady?”

“Um, yes.” You called out; the door was opened slowly. Sebastian’s expression was appreciative at the sight of you.

“Just enchanting…”

You blushed at his scrutinizing stare. “What is it?”
“Something’s missing.” Sebastian went to the dresser and opened one of the drawers; he pulled out a small box. “Turn around please.”

You did so a bit reluctantly; you could feel him standing close behind you, hot breath on your neck and a cold chain sliding around your throat.

“There we are.” Sebastian said cheerfully as he fastened the silver choker. “The finishing touch.”

He took you by the shoulders and turned you around to face him; his expression was grave.

“Sebastian?”

“You look lovely.” The compliment was said in an oddly somber tone; to your shock, he drew you in closer until you were a hair’s breadth away. “So lovely, I’m quite certain any man would fantasize about stealing you away.”

Sebastian gave you a soft smile before pulling you into a passionate kiss, far too much so for a woman he had just met. You had never been kissed in such a way, and while your body was responding in kind, your mind was telling you to shove him away. And so you did.

“What the bloody hell is the matter with you?!” You spat at him; your eyes were narrowed in fury. “How dare you force yourself on me? What kind of man are you?!"

“Man?” Sebastian seemed utterly amused by your outburst. “My lady, I don’t know what you mean. I am simply one hell of a butler.”

“You-you-!” Before he could say anything else, you stormed over to the door. “I demand you get out so I can change; I’m leaving.”

You shrieked; Sebastian was standing right in front of the door.

“It’d be rude to leave in the middle of a party you were invited to, don’t you agree?” he asked calmly; you jumped back with a glare.

“How did you-?”

“There’s that fire I’ve been sensing.” Sebastian muttered; he walked forward until you were backed up against the wall. “It smells delicious.”

“What the hell is he talking about?!” You panicked; he had you cornered. Sebastian’s gaze was cold, but his smile was radiant.

“So much spirit, it’s a shame for you to hide it under a facade.” Sebastian said lowly; his fingers lightly trailed along your jawline. “I must admit, my young master is accommodating enough to give me the whole east wing to myself. Most likely he wants me out of his sight, but still, it’s wonderfully useful at times like these.”

You shuddered at his touch. “I don’t understand.”

“Simply put, this room is actually my quarters.” Sebastian said lightly. “Furthermore, should you scream, and I’m sure you will regardless of what I tell you, no one can hear it.”

He leaned in closer, his lips hovering over your own, his eyes staring into the depths of your soul; nothing else he had done or said until then had felt so violating.

“What an adorable face you’re making.” Sebastian smirked. “I can’t decide what expression I favor
most...I suppose I’ll just have to sample all of them at some point.”

“Let me go.” You couldn’t move your arms or legs. “What did you do to me?!”

“I doubt you’d believe it, not that it really matters. Knowing will not change the course of your fate. Nothing will.”

Sebastian picked you up in his arms and threw you onto the bed; you bounced on the plush material, your hair fanning out over the sheets as Sebastian forced you to lie down. The lights were put out by an unseen force; the only light remaining came from a single candle glowing on the nightstand.

“This is much more appropriate lighting. I never did care for these bright lights, they leave me quite agitated. Besides, there are some things you can only see in the dark.” Sebastian wasted no time in leaving burning kisses on your exposed neck, slowly making his way to your lips; you gasped seeing his eyes burn and glow brighter than the flame of the candle.

“Yes…” Sebastian said softly. “I think I’ll just keep you around for a long while. Why do you look so glum? The night is still young after all.”

“Why are you doing this?” You asked; you couldn’t fight him. Your body was frozen in place and something told you he’d drop the polite butler routine if you stepped out of line.

“Why you ask? Why not?” Sebastian chuckled humorlessly. “I saw you and I desired you. There’s really no big mystery my lady. Even so, I suppose I should give you fair warning.” his voice was noticeably less cordial. “I have claimed you and I have caught you. If you should try to defy your position, I will have no choice but to punish you for your disobedience. Those are the rules of the game and I expect you to adhere to them; can you do that?”

Swallowing a curse, you nodded stiffly; Sebastian sighed and smiled down at you wearily.

“I’ll just have to teach you. Yes, it’s true, I am a servant and nothing more.” he cupped your face, forcing you to look at him. “But you are mine, which puts you at the bottom of the food chain so to speak. It’s truly a pity I’ll have to return to help with the party, but we can play for just a bit until then.”

You whimpered in pain as Sebastian sought your lips again, biting down and drawing blood; he licked it off, the tip of his tongue lightly digging into the opening of the cut to make it bleed more. As he smiled you were horrified to see fangs; his eyes were glowing even brighter, threatening to consume you and drive you mad with fear.

Your voice shook as you spoke. “W-what…..what are you?”

“What am I? I am Sebastian Michaelis, faithful servant to the Phantomhive household and now, I am your keeper. I can fly you to the gates of paradise or drag you to the bowels of hell; it all depends on you in the end.” Sebastian’s smile was beautifully cruel.

“How can someone smile so coldly? He isn’t human, he can’t be human!” You winced as he leaned in to whisper in your ear.

“You see my lady, I am simply one hell of a butler.”
Makoto Tachibana

All he wanted to do was help you.

“Mako-chan watch out for the ghooosts!”

Makoto trembled as the two boys ran around him in circles, whooping and cackling wickedly; he wished recess was over so he could go back inside.

“Guys, please stop it!” he cried and covered his head with his arms. “I know ghosts aren’t real!”

“Yes they are!” one of them spoke lowly. “And they’re coming to get youuuuu~”

“Stop!”

The boys all looked up as you came marching toward them with a frown.

“You’re being mean! I’m gonna tell the teacher if you don’t stop!” You stomped your foot and the boys ran off.

“Tattle tale!”

“Stupid!” You stuck your tongue out and sputtered; Makoto was looking at you with wide eyes. You turned to him with a smile.

“Hey, you alright? Don’t worry, ghosts definitely aren’t real, my mom said so!”

Makoto sniffled. “R-really?”

“Yeah!” You helped him up. “Let’s go play okay?”

“Alright!” Makoto laughed and raced you around the swings.

13 years later:

“Come on, Makoto, you know ghosts aren’t real!” You laughed as you dragged Makoto toward the haunted house class 2-B had set up.

“I know that, but it l-looks kind of dark in there, don’t you think?” Makoto said; despite his larger size, you were still able to drag him with you. “How about we go to the ramen stand?”

“Please Mako-chan?” You clasped your hands together. “It’s the last cultural festival, and we’ve never gone into a haunted house before!”

Not that there hadn’t been other ones, but you had never made Makoto come inside with you before. You just wanted to have the full cultural festival experience before graduation.

“Okay.” Despite his fear, Makoto felt his heart warm up as you beamed at him.

“I’ll treat us to ramen after, alright?” You held his hand as you walked through the maze; you didn’t think much of it. You two had been good friends for a long time, and you knew he would feel better knowing you were right beside him.
Makoto blushed happily as he looked down at your intertwined hands.

“I’m sorry guys.” he thought of his friends stuck at their own booths as you shrieked and clung to him after a ‘zombie’ popped out from under a table. “It’s the last festival...I just wanted to be with her alone for a while.”

“Wow, that was creepy!” You laughed and held onto Makoto’s arm as you tried to catch your breath. He inched closer as he walked with you into another area with strobe lights. A second later, one of the guys from the basketball team leaped in front of you; he was dressed as a vampire with fake blood running down his mouth.

He made a hissing noise as he tugged you close with a roguish smile. “Your blood! I need your blood!”

You yelped in mock fear as his fake teeth skimmed the skin on your neck.

Makoto’s vision went fuzzy as he stepped forward.

“Hey!” the boy cried out as Makoto yanked him away from you; before you could scream, the boy was knocked down onto the floor, real blood gushing from his nose.

“Makoto!” You exclaimed as he dragged you out of the haunted house, barreling through costumed students to find the exit. “Stop it you’re hurting my arm!”

Makoto loosened his grip only a bit as he made you follow him outside; the sky was dark and cloudy. It was all very ominous.

“What’s going on with you?!”

You were in shock; Makoto was the most gentle person you had ever known, hardly ever even raised his voice. In all of your thirteen years as friends, you had never once seen him angry or violent.

“He wasn’t really going to bite me, there wasn’t any reason to attack him-”

“Yes, there was.” Makoto’s voice was soft; he was know holding both your wrists. His eyes smoldered as he stared at you. “Can’t you understand how it felt to see you like that?”

From the look on your face, he could see you were confused. He had tried so hard to make his feelings known, had done everything to make sure you knew he would always be there, that he’d protect you, that he-

“I don’t get it.” You confessed. “You’re starting to scare me…that wasn’t like you at all.”

Makoto’s smile was gentle. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that to happen. All these years, all I’ve wanted was to have you by my side so I can watch over you. Remember, how you used to for me when we were kids? Please, don’t worry; you’re safe with me.”

“What are you doing?” You backed away as he leaned in.

“I…” Makoto pulled you back abruptly into his chest. “I love you. Please accept my feelings!”

You struggled to escape his embrace. “Makoto let go before someone sees!”

“You didn’t mind when he was holding you!” Makoto cried out; the more you tried to get free, the harder he squeezed. “This was supposed to be our night. Don’t you see how much it hurts me to see
you being held by some other guy? I care about you, and you never notice!"

“You didn’t have to punch him!” You protested.

“HE DESERVED IT!”

Makoto took a deep breath as you froze. “I’d do it again and worse if I ever see you with someone like that. I’m the one who’s supposed to hold you. I’m the one who’s supposed to protect you always, not anyone else!”

“You’re hurting me. Makoto, let me go okay? I promise I won’t tell anyone.” You tried to reason desperately.

Makoto’s anger was tinged with sadness. “I don’t care about that, just say you love me too!”

Your eyes widened seeing his dangerously narrowed glare. “I-I love you Makoto.”

He shook his head with an almost childish pout. “Mako-chan. Call me that. You used to always call me that.”

“Mako-chan.” You repeated quietly; he smiled down at you warmly before pecking your cheeks and the tip of your nose with a blush.

“I love when you call me that. I need to come up with a cute name for you now that we’re dating.”

Makoto’s tone was so jovial and light; was this really the same guy from just a second ago?

“Let’s go back inside and get that ramen, okay?” Makoto stroked your cheek lovingly, his eyes shining brightly in the dark. “I’ll treat you.”

“Okay...thanks.” The iron grip on your hand made it impossible to not follow him.

“You know what, how about we just go to my house?” Makoto’s blush could be seen clearly in the shadows. “My parents and siblings are gone for the night...I'll try to make you something to eat and we can cuddle in my room…”

The thought of being trapped with him in his house with no one else there terrified you, but Makoto didn’t leave any room for argument.

“I’m not much of a cook, but I’m sure I can fix us something.” Makoto smiled sheepishly as he pulled you with him. You felt like a rag doll being tossed about as he made you follow him all the way to his house.

“Why is he doing this?” You asked yourself as Makoto lifted you up in his arms and carried you into the house. He smiled down at you and kissed your forehead.

“I’ll always take care of you no matter what...”
“Haruka-san?”

“Hm?”

You blinked. “What are you staring at?”

Instead of answering, Haru pressed his face farther into the glass; there was a longing look to his gaze that reminded you of romance dramas.

“Haruka-san….I think you might be scaring the fish.”

“This water is so clear.”

“Oh boy.” You smiled wryly. "Anyway, you’re supposed to be facing me.”

“For what?” Haruka didn’t tear his gaze away.

“For the picture….the one I told you about like, five seconds ago.”

“Oh.” he turned around. “Is this good?”

“Um, move a bit to the left, I want a good shot of the fish too.”

Haruka stepped over. “Good?”

“Eh, little more.”

He moved. “Now?”

“Great!” You chirped and raised the camera to your face; after a second of trying to get Haruka in focus, you lowered the camera with a little frown. “Hm, hold on a minute…”

“What is it?”

You inwardly commended Haruka for his patience. “Could you just...look less bored to death?”

“I’m not bored.”

In truth, you would understand why he might be bored; a school project on marine life wasn’t exactly the most exciting way to spend a Saturday, but Haruka seemed more than willing to partner up with you.

“I know he likes swimming, but…” You watched as Haruka turned his face sideways to stare at the aquarium once again; it was pretty to be sure, but you knew his attention was more on the water and not the colorful array of fish. “I guess this would be considered a good time for him.”

“Haruka-san?”

“Hm…”

You sighed. “The picture?”

“Oh. Yeah.”
“Okay, just, look into the lens and smile.”

“Kay.”

You held up the camera again. “Now.”

“Alright.”

“...Haruka-san, you need to smile now.”

“But I am.”

You snapped the picture with a resigned sigh. “Close enough…”

“Well, that’s all we need; we’re going to do really good on this.” You grinned as you went to stand by Haruka. “I gotta say, this is more fun now that we don’t have to take anymore notes and stuff.”

“I’m having fun.” Haruka followed you as you caught sight of the manatee exhibit; you cooed and gushed over it’s wrinkled face and flubbery belly.

“They’re so cute!” You giggled as the manatee slowly rotated and yawned. “I’m glad to hear you’re enjoying yourself too. I have to admit, it’s not easy for me to tell what you’re thinking.”

“I’m having fun. And I’m hungry.”

“Oh. How about we go get some lunch? There’s a few cheaper restaurants nearby.”

Haruka nodded with minimum eagerness, but you got the gist.

“Let’s go, I’ve heard there’s this one place that serves fish and chips to go with the aquatic theme.” You stuffed your camera in your purse and began to walk toward the exit, but Haruka wasn’t moving. “Do you want to look at the water a bit longer.”

“Don’t call me Haruka.”

You smiled apologetically to cover up your hurt. “Uh, I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking. Nanase-san then.”

“Haru is fine. Everyone calls me that.”

“Does it bother you Haruka sounds like a girl’s name?”

He frowned ever so slightly and looked away; you tried to keep from laughing at the almost sulky quality of it. This was the most emotion you had seen out of Haruka in days.

“I don’t think you should be embarrassed, it’s a nice name. But I’ll stick to Haru if you want.”

Haruka followed you silently as you talked on the way to the restaurant; that wasn’t exactly correct, it was really more of a stand with picnic chairs and tables surrounding it, but there weren’t too many people, which seemed to put Haruka more at ease. You continued chatting the whole way, and though he didn’t seem like it, you knew Haruka was listening. Every so often he would add in a grunt or a nod, and sometimes even an agreeable ‘hm’.

“You bought our tickets, so I’ll pay for the food okay?”

Haruka sat down and claimed the table farthest from the stand. “I want grilled mackerel.”
“Okay, be right back.” You gave him a little wave, though you were a bit annoyed you had to walk so far to get the food; you didn’t blame him for wanting to sit so far away. Near the front of the tables were a group of teenagers goofing around and rough housing.

“Dude, stop eating my fries!”

The largest of them grinned wildly and grabbed the other guys soda instead and held it up high over his head. “You want it, come get it!”

The rest of the boys laughed as the shortest one grinned smugly and jumped. “Douche! Just ‘cause you’re tall doesn’t give you the right to be an ass!”

“Aw, piss off-oof!”

The shorter boy lost his footing and knocked into his friend; the taller one was sent toppling over in his chair; you stopped as he landed with a hard thump.

“Hey, what the hell was that?!” the boy looked down at his uniform. “My shirt!”

“It was an accident!” the shorter boy eyed the soda that spilled all over his friends shirt; the other boys went silent as they watched their friends glare at each other. With a frustrated growl, the tallest threw a punch at the other, but he ran under his arm and ended up right in front of you.

“Shit!”

You were sprawled on the ground; as you fell down, your back slammed into one of the tables, sending it to the ground and you gasping in pain.

“Nice going dumbass!”

“Hey are you-?” the shortest boy yelped as he was pushed back into the wall of the stand. “Who?”

“H-huh?”

Haruka gripped onto the boy’s collar and shoved him harder into the brick wall. “Which one of you did that? Tell me now."

“Hey, hang on a second, it was just an accident! Why don’t you just-OW!” One of the boys said indignantly; he tried to yank back Haruka’s arm, but was met with a swift kick to his shin. Haruka never took his eyes off the shortest boy or unfurled his clenched fist shaking around the other boy’s collar.

“H-Haru?” You asked wiping a tear from your eye; you could feel a bruise forming on your lower back and the lingering pain made you wince as you tried to stand.

Haruka snarled lowly and forced the boy’s head into the wall. “Who?”

“I’m sorry, it was an accident!”

“Apologize to her. Now!”

The owner of the stand was looking on worriedly, one hand reaching for his phone; you sprung up and took a hold of Haruka’s poised arm, ready to throw a punch.

“Haru, let’s go!” You yanked him away and he followed you reluctantly, but not before he sent one
“What was that?”

The two of you were in front of your home; Haruka hadn’t said a word the whole way. This alone wasn’t disconcerting, but the tenseness that seemed to envelope him was.

“I never asked.”

You fixed him with a questioning gaze and he seemed to read your mind.

“Are you okay? You looked like you were in pain…

“I’m fine, it was just an accident.” You took a breath. “Haru, why did you do that?”

Haruka looked down at the pavement, arms stiff at his sides; you wished more than anything you could see into his head.

“Why did you get so mad? I thought you were really going to hurt that guy. I mean, you’re always so quiet, I…”

“Do you want me to tell you what I’m thinking?”

You looked at him suddenly. “I…want to know why you got so angry.”

“Did it scare you?” Haruka asked as he took a step forward; you unknowingly took a step back and almost collided with your front door.

“It was really unexpected. I was worried mostly, but not really scared I guess…”

Haruka nodded and smile softly. “That’s good to hear.”

“He’s smiling. He’s really, actually smiling.” Your jaw dropped a few centimeters as Haruka advanced closer; one of his arms was propped against the door over your head, almost as though he was trying to keep you from leaving.

“I’ve had so much fun lately with you…but you didn’t think so. You don’t seem to understand my feelings at all.”

“I’m…sorry?” You said tentatively; Haruka shrugged and the smile was replaced by a new seriousness.

“I guess I should try to make it more obvious.” Haruka said; he took one of your hands by the fingers. “I’ll try, but I hope you can have some patience with me.”

“Haru!” You managed to gasp as he brushed the tips of your fingers against his lips.
“I’m thinking of how angry I was earlier….they’re lucky you stepped in…”

Your face paled at his tone, but Haruka didn’t seem aware as he continued his sentence with an eerily calm demeanor.

“I’ll be honest with my thoughts from now on.” Haruka pressed your hand to his cheek and put his forehead to yours. “I enjoyed our time today. I was glad to be your partner for this project. And if we’re out somewhere and you got hurt like that again, I don’t think I can guarantee anything. I almost lost it earlier...I’ll just have to keep a closer eye on you next time.”

Haruka wasn’t phased at your stunned expression. “Also...I really like you.”
Author’s Note: Spoilers for episode 10 of ’91 Days’.

“You can say it.”

“Say what?”

Angelo leaned forward slightly in his seat, eyeing the lapels you were stitching. “You hate me I suppose, for getting Corteo involved in this.”

“I don’t hate you An-Avilio.” You said tying off the final stitch; you had a perfectly good sewing machine nestled in the corner of your desk, but on smaller fixes, you preferred sewing by hand. Your eyes could focus more that way. “Corteo made the decision to follow you. He is your brother after all…”

“But?”

You laid down your thread and needle. “I don’t understand why you’re even putting yourself in danger like this….forgive me, I can only imagine what you must be feeling…”

Angelo waited for you to continue as he lighted a match and brought it up to his cigarette.

“You didn’t have to come back for this. They think you’re dead….Avilio, you could live with me and Corteo. You could have sold booze with him under the counter or helped me in my shop.”

“I could have.”

“It could’ve been like old times.” You gave him a tender smile. “We could be your family.”

The smile wavered as Angelo took a long drag from his cigarette; his face betrayed nothing.

“That’s not an option for me.” Angelo said. “After that day….the thought of revenge is all that’s kept me going.”

“I guess it’s too late now at any rate.” You picked up your scissors and began cutting cloth to make custom ordered slacks. “Just…look after him for me.”

Angelo nodded and stood up with a stretch. “I’ll stop by later with Corteo. We’ll find him.”

“Avilio.”

He paused but didn’t turn around to face you.

“Look after yourself too.”
“I’m glad I got to see you again.”

Angelo couldn’t look his old friend in the face as he smiled. From that day three months ago, Corteo had accepted him, accepted his decision, and now he was accepting his death, all with an understanding smile.

“Angelo…” Coreto kept his voice soft in case the others could hear outside the door. “Tell her I’m sorry I couldn’t see her again.”

“Why?” Angelo’s finger quivered on the trigger.

“Angelo...because we’re…”

The shot rang through the small room; Nero came into the room not long after and clapped his hand on Angelo’s shoulder.

“This is the way things go. I’m sorry Avilio.”

Angelo looked down at the gun; his hand was no longer shaking.
You grabbed the counter to keep balance. “Avilio...no...”

“He confessed to betrayal.” Angelo said; just before you collapsed, he took you by the shoulders to steady you.

“No, not Corteo.” You admonished. “He’d never, he would never-!”

“He did it thinking that way I would leave the family and abandon my plan.”

Angelo didn’t flinch as your hand made contact with his chin; his hat fell to the floor. All the lights in your home were off and only the faint glow of the streetlights shining through the window made him able to see your pained expression.

“Don’t talk like that!” Your chin wobbled and you covered your face with your hands. “Don’t just say it like it doesn’t matter.”

Angelo didn’t move as you rested your forehead against his chest.

“They really killed him? Corteo....” You whispered brokenly into Angelo’s shirt. “Avilio, please tell me...did he suffer?”

“It was a quick shot to the heart. He told me to tell you sorry.” Angelo frowned and averted his gaze. “He thought of you to the very end.”

You looked up at him through your red rimmed eyes. “You have to go; what if something happens to you? I keep feeling like it was just a matter of time. Please Avilio, I can’t lose you too!”

“Calm down. You’ll just upset yourself more.”

You took a shaky breath as Angelo raised your chin up; his eyes were hollow.

“Do you hate me?”

“W-what?”

“I take responsibility.” Angelo said bluntly. “I pulled him in. It was for my welfare that Corteo came back to Lawless. Be honest.”

“I hate this.” You confessed. “I never wanted him to be involved...I never...”

“And me?”

“I wished you had stayed away.”

Angelo pulled away and stared at the ground.

“There’s no way you can make it out of this alive.” You shook your head.

“I know.”

“Avilio...is there anything else I should know?” You asked. “I know it will only make me sadder, but I need to know.”
Angelo kept his voice steady. “Corteo told me to take care of you if I could.”

You gaped as he pulled a stack of bills from his knapsack.

“This is the money I was going to give him to go to school; he refused and got angry with me.” Angelo’s lips curved up barely. “But then he still came back to save me.”

“Don’t blame yourself. I understand he made his own decision.” You came forward and hugged him. “You were his best friend. Don’t forget that.”

“He told me to look after you.” Angelo pried you off him to look at you directly; even with the close proximity, he felt as if he was seeing you through a fog. You almost seemed unreal to him at that moment in time and it was tempting to say things he couldn’t say to an illusion instead; regardless, he knew the difference between reality and fantasy. In the end, it was only a dream.

“I’ll do whatever I can to help with your business. Think of it as payback for all the pain I’ve caused you.”

“Avilio...we were both so happy to see you again, don’t you know that?” You told him with a sniffle. “We always worried about you; Corteo was panicked when you left that morning...I was terrified you had been killed.”

Angelo’s hands trembled as you held him; he hadn’t been held in such a secure embrace since his mother died and if you hadn’t spoken up in time, he might’ve lost himself.

“Thank you for coming back to us, even if just for a little.”

The guilt had lasted only for a moment or so when Angelo shot a bullet through Corteo’s heart; the bitter animosity he felt toward the murderers of his family was only matched by the resentment he felt toward his blood brother for taking the only woman he had ever loved.

The accepting, peaceful smile on Corteo’s face only served to remind him of the happy life you and him might have had together; he was certain being loved by you was enough to put Corteo at ease before his demise. His life had been so full, and the very thought of the years you spent with him made Angelo’s blood boil as he pulled the trigger.

The day he came back to town and found you and Corteo happily in love made whatever might have been left of his sanity crumble.

“You should go to sleep now, it’s getting late.” Angelo made his way to the door, trying not to bump into anything in the darkness; he brushed off your own concerns about him getting enough rest and unlocked the door. “I’ll try to come by again soon.”

“Angelo.”

“Yeah?”

You padded after him and took one of his hands. “I love you.”

It was the last and only thing he wanted to hear from you; any hope of a normal life was shot. Angelo had already broken your heart; you were yet another casualty in his plans, another innocent who’s life was thrown into chaos because of his thirst for vengeance.

“I’ll be back.” he nodded. “I'm glad...you don't hate me.”
Angelo would admit it to himself; if he couldn’t spend a happy life with you, then he was glad Corteo couldn’t either. Acceptance of his own tragic fate was the only thing keeping him from taking you for himself.

He was still stuck on the fact that you had cherished another man. Your care and concern was only a fraction of what Angelo desired and the only way he knew he had any decency left in him was the shame he felt from your tears, even if he didn’t have enough to feel properly guilty for his actions.

Angelo waved and gave you a fleeting smile as you closed the door; he waited outside until your bedroom light was shut off.

If he couldn’t have you, then no one else could either; it would be just enough to know as long as he lived, no other man would come near you, even if it meant you lived your life trapped in the same darkness that enveloped him that night seven years ago.

“Sorry...I love you too.”
"Geez, look at that kid." A soldier shook his head along with a couple of his friends; you were waiting to unload the potatoes, petting your horse on the snout when you heard a derisive snort. The small group of boys was watching a somewhat frail looking young man attempt to finish his set of push ups.

"Corporal is gonna blow his lid; this kid won’t last here.” A girl had come by to join them, a mild look of annoyance crossing her features.

"Bet he wished he was in the Garrison or the Military Police with those other wannabe soldiers.” A stout boy with a solid frame chuckled. “I could break his arm with one move, imagine what a titan would do.”

“Don’t even joke man.” the first boy said sternly. “Seriously, if he gets assigned on a job with us and he can’t handle active duty, we’re in deep shit.”

The girl made an affirmative grunt. “Yeah, might as well switch over and be a farmhand.”

“Excuse me?”

They all turned around to face you; the first boy and the girl seemed a bit embarrassed. It was obvious that they had no idea you were there. The whole group had gone silent, some maintaining eye contact and others looking away as if they hadn’t just laughed at the girl’s quip.

“Yeah, I guess your mouths are only good for shit talking and eating my harvest.” You smacked the side of the cart. “Now don’t get me wrong, I’m not knocking soldiers, but just where the hell do you guys think your food comes from?”

“W-well, fine, but it’s not as dangerous as being in the Survey Corps.” The stout boy shot back defiantly. “We risk our lives nearly every day for humanity. You just pick corn.”

You felt your face grow hot and stormed over to the boy; you were a good feet taller, maybe not as sturdy, but the look in your eyes made him shrink as you held out one hand in his face.

“You see this?”

The boy nodded quickly; the others were looking in curiosity, some feeling a bit worried you might be up for starting a fight, and if that was the case, they would get the blame. As soldiers, they should be acting accordingly, not engaging in childish name calling or scraps with civilians.

“Show me your hand.” You demanded.

The boy held it out immediately; there were worn and rough calluses from what was training; a new blister was just beginning to form on the pad of his middle finger.

Your own hand was crisscrossed with old scars and new alike, the discolored flesh prominent against your palm that had dirt in the creases, not to mention just as many calluses as his.

“And we got guys down there who only have one damn hand from accidents at the mill or from faulty equipment; don’t stand there and act like we just sit on our asses all day whistling tunes and pickin’ peas.”
You raised a hand to the boys face; he let out a cry as you gently patted his face.
“That being said, maybe you should lay off the peas. Anymore and those straps might bust.” You glances at the binds for his holster.

“Sorry.” The girl muttered and stepped beside the boy. “Look, I’m the one who was talking, he’s just an idiot.”

“Hey!”

“Shut up man.” another boy smacked him upside the head. “We’re sorry, okay?”

You scratched your head; they didn’t seem entirely convinced, but they didn’t look condescending.

“It’s alright. Hope you guys like this shipment, we were able to grow 5% more than last year.” You nodded respectfully. “Thanks for your service.”

“Same to you.” The first boy gave his friends looks as he saluted you cordially; they followed his lead and you felt your cheeks grow hot again.

“Ah, well, you know…”

“Hey!”

“Shit the corporal.” the stout boy straightened up as Levi came over, glowering ominously.

“Sir, good timing.” You reached out your hand. “Good to see you alive too.”

“It’d be better if these brats were doing the tasks I assigned in a timely fucking manner.” Levi shot the soldiers glares. “Why the hell are the barrack windows not shining right about now?”

“My apologies sir!”

“Wow, they’ve got good timing too.” You said vaguely as they began marching away in unison toward the barracks on the other side of the field.

“Lazy kids.” Levi muttered as he watched them go. “They were supposed to do it right after their exercises.”

“Sorry about that, but there is good news.”

“Oh?” Levi inquired with barely any tone to his voice. “And what would that be? The potatoes have been scrubbed of any residue dirt?”

“Yes. And I got you a little something.” You reached into your overalls and pulled out a small pouch; inside was tea leaves wrapped carefully in layers of paper. “Smell it.”

Levi took the pouch and undid the drawstring. “What did you do?”

“Nothing.” You smiled cheekily and rubbed your knuckles on your stained shirt. “Just thought you’d enjoy a change of pace. I had to bargain and haggle my ass off to get it; I expect compensation.”

Levi’s already furrowed brow creased in confusion; he didn’t know what to make of the odd, but comfortingly fragrant scent of the leaves.

“Tell me what it is. Unless you want one of those potatoes shoved down your throat? It’ll at least give you an excuse to not answer my questions.”
“Okay, okay.” You beamed. “It’s this black tea called Earl grey. Don’t know who this Earl guy is, but he makes damn good tea from what I heard.”

Levi sent you a dull look. “Please tell me you’re joking.”

“No, I heard it was really good.”

“Right.” Levi sniffed the inside of the bag once more. “Hm. Not bad. You busy right now?”

“I still need to help unload, but we’re staying over night. The best feed comes from this district.” You chuckled dryly. “Not that there’s a whole ton of places for variety to go to.” you sighed. “Damn, can you imagine what it would be like to have all that land outside the walls? All that good soil, we could plant enough food to feed the population for months to come in one season.”

“True. But then you wouldn’t have any time to visit me.”

Levi began walking away before you could so much as utter another sound.

“Be at my quarters ten minutes to six for supper. If this tea sucks you’re getting me my usual black.”

You gave a mock salute. “Yessir.”

It took you another five hours to load and unload all the potatoes, carrots, turnips, cabbage, and wheat for bread off your carts. The other fieldhands sent you knowing looks; everyone on the plantation knew of your ‘special relationship’ with the corporal. Jokes abound concerning ‘illegal dealings’ and ‘bribery to a high officer’ were whispered as they slapped their knees and nudged your side. It was all in good fun; there was a strong sense of camaraderie among fieldhands.

“Look at them, strutting around like they’re tough shit. Try putting a shoe on an orny stallion and let me know how heaven is after you die from the concussion.” One of them snorted as he handed you a crate.

“Well, they do fight titans.” You conceded with a tired huff as you loaded the last barrel.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean they have a right to act like we’re a bunch of cowards who eat dirt.”

You did hate the jokes and the sneers; maybe because the got such a bad rap, the Survey Corps felt the need to have their own group to pick on. But it was still bull as far as you were concerned and you’d say so to anyone who thought differently.

It was just this sort of attitude that got you in trouble on your trips to town; like for instance, the small group of soldiers who were confronting you just as you were on your way to see Levi.

“I guess it’s true; farm hands do smell like dung.” one of the girls smirked and the others guffawed and chuckled as if she had said something really witty.

“Go scale a wall and get your legs chewed off bitch.” You flicked your middle finger at them.

“Show some respect you cow!”

You sputtered as a tomato hit you right in the mouth; they cheered and grabbed a few tomatoes from the bucket the girl had brought. Before you knew it, you were being pelted left and right.

“Hm...juicy.” You licked your lips as you dodged lazily; honestly, you couldn’t care less about getting vegetable juice on your already dirt and manure encrusted clothes. “We got a good crop this month...”
One of the boys paused his arm in mid throw; he stared, not sure how to react. The others were in a similar state as you picked a chunk of tomato off your shoulder and popped it in your mouth.

“Wasting food. Making a mess.”

The cold growl made all of you freeze; out of the shadows of the bunks came Levi, boots making a loud crunch against the ground as he stormed over. His eyes were dull and narrowed; one hand was on his holster, the handle of his blade just out of the sheath.

“You ungrateful, rude little brats. And in front of my own sleeping quarters; I have to say, you must have balls of fucking steel to pull a stunt like this.” Levi’s eyes caught your profile; you gave him a blank look as his glare became more fierce. “This-

“Sir, we apologize!” the girl began frantically. “It was just a joke!”

“We weren’t thinking sir, we’ll get this cleaned up right away.” one of the boys began picking up the tomatoes that had smashed to the ground. “It won’t happen again.”

“I mean, she’s just a dirty-”

You clapped a hand to your mouth as Levi lunged; the kid was pinned down, the tip of his swords blade pointed right in the back of their neck. The boy was paralyzed; he didn’t dare say another word as he felt the sharp prick dig into his flesh.

“Soldier, listen and listen good.” Levi commanded lowly; the others had backed off, nearly jumping a few feet away from where their friend was lying on the ground, face half smashed in the dirt. “When I release you, you will get on your hands and knees and beg for her forgiveness.”

“Y-y-y-y-e-y-e-ah!” the boy felt something wet drip onto his collar; the blade had just pierced his skin. “Sir, please, I didn’t mean to-!”

“Enough.” Levi yanked him up by the scruff of his neck and dragged him over to you; you were in such shock, you hadn’t even bothered to wipe your face clean. The juice dripped down your chin and hair; your eyes had gone so wide, you were surprised it didn’t get in them to obstruct your view as Levi slammed the heel of his foot into the back of the boy’s head to force him to bow.

“I said beg; it’s that or on our next mission you or one of your little shit for brains’ friends mysteriously vanishes. Or maybe they’ll find your dead body, mangled beyond recognition.” Levi said evenly as he ground his boot down. “How about it kid?”

“-I-I!”

“Levi, calm down.” You balked and cringed away at the scene; none of the soldiers dared to move from their spots. The girl was openly weeping and the other boys were shaking as they stared in stunned fear at their corporal.

“These kids were just pulling this stupid stunt.” You tried to chuckle and sound reasonable. “Just make ‘em scrub the street or something; it’s getting late, let’s go have that tea-”

“Apologize unless you want this thing to stab through your skull.” Levi snarled at the sniveling boy.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I’ll never do it again, I’ll never-please, just don’t kill me!”

You felt bile rise to your throat as the boy sobbed incoherently; Levi just slowly raised his foot with an an impassive frown.
“Get this shit cleaned up and report this incident to your superior. I think you know how much to leave out.” Levi kicked the side of the boy’s head and he was sent tumbling to the right of you. “At ease.”

The others helped drag the boy to a standing position and ran off to their stations; you stood there, immobile. You knew Levi pretty well. You knew he was tough, ruthless; he was no stranger to violence and killing of living beings, and that wasn’t strictly titans. But you had never known him to be needlessly cruel to anyone, especially not his fellow soldiers.

“Hey, um…” you trailed off weakly as Levi sent you a withering look; he advanced and untied his cravat with a tired sigh.

“What am I going to do with you?” The words were spoken flatly as he roughly wiped your cheeks and nose. “You can wash up once we get inside; I won’t have you making my bed smell like tomatoes.”

You followed him inside silently, not saying a word as he handed you a wet towel and a bucket, along with a change of clothes. They were far too big for him, so you assumed he had gathered them ahead of time; you wished this act of consideration could be met with more joy, but right now all you felt was apprehension.

“You hairs a mess too. You better not bring lice in here.” Levi combed your hair, parting the roots now and then to get a good look at your scalp. The act was much gentler than how he had wiped your face clean, but this did nothing to set you at ease.

“Don’t you think that was a bit much…?”

“They wasted valuable resources and dirtied the street; a member of the Survey Corp should act like one, not a tantrum throwing hoodlum. Little bastards; I won’t be able to get those stains out of your pants.”

“Levi, who gives a damn?!” You exclaimed with a desperate plea as you whipped your head around. “Okay, yeah, I get you have to do stuff like that, but...but that was way too harsh.”

“They should count themselves lucky.” Levi countered as he slammed the comb down sharply on his nightstand. “And you should be thanking me.”

“What, you protected my honor or something? You just traumatized a few punks!” You took a calming breath and tried to calm down at his sour expression. “Levi, I didn’t want you to do that.”

“I don’t care.”

You backed away as Levi leaned in and took your arms tight in his hands; he was looking up at you, but the height difference did nothing to make him any less intimidating. The strength, the raw nerve this man possessed, as though he were made from steel himself, both drew you in and made you wary. A few times you had wondered to yourself what you were doing with such a man; now was one of those times.

“Let’s get something straight now.” Levi put a hand to the nap of your neck, fingers digging in lightly to bring you closer and closer until you could feel his hot breath on your trembling lips. “I don’t like people messing up what’s mine. Got it?”

You nodded dumbly and he withdrew with a faintly pleased look; he was okay again. For how long, you couldn’t say.
“Then let’s have that tea.”
“Kaneki…”

You watched paralyzed as he writhed on the floor of his apartment; you thought he was having a seizure, but something else was wrong. His eye-

“Kaneki!” You dropped the bag on your shoulder and crouched to the floor to hold down his hands. “Kaneki, what’s wrong with your eye?!”

“L-leave!” Kaneki gasped; his whole body was suddenly completely still. His eyes were pin pricks as saliva trailed out the side of his mouth and down his chin in a small pool on the tile floor. The kitchen was a mess of empty containers, wrappers, and half eaten food.

“Kaneki, what happened?” You struggled to keep your voice level, trying not to look at his eye. “That eye...no, it can’t be…

“You smell so good...heh heh...” Kaneki’s mouth stretched in a pained smile; tears were pooling in the corners of his eyes, magnifying and distorting the red iris of the left. “I-I’m sorry...I’m just so hungry…”

“No.” Your eyes went wide. “No, there’s got to be another explanation-”

“GET OUT!”

Your skull was throbbing from the impact as you slide down the front door, crumpling to the ground with a sharp cry.

“Kaneki-!”

“GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!”

As you scrambled out of the apartment, you knew you would never forget the anguished screams echoing through the open doorway and into the cold night.

You didn’t go back; he would kill you.

You didn’t want to call the police; who knows what the CCG might do if they saw Kaneki in the state he was in.

So, you went home and curled up on your bed, waiting until it was morning and for the daylight to assuage your fears and convince you you were safe and the unassuming young man from your class wasn’t planning on finding you and eating you alive.

“Class is tomorrow. Will he be there?”

The whole reason you had stopped by was to return some notes Kaneki had lent you; he had missed a class and you had taken notes from that class to give to him in return for his help. His friend had given you the address with a teasing smile and a comment about Kaneki’s availability; you had laughed and thanked him and was on your way for what was supposed to be a simple errand.

There was nothing simple about what you saw; there was no mistaking that eye or the hungry way he gazed at you.
“If he’s there, will he try to-?” You paused packing your bag and took a deep breath to stop your knees from knocking. “No, just calm down and think. He told me to leave. He doesn’t want to hurt me. Maybe he is a ghoul, but there’s more to it than that.”

You made your decision and went to class; if Kaneki was there, you would wait until later to speak with him.

But he was absent.

“Hide-san?”

Kaneki’s friend looked over at you from his notebook. “Hey, what’s up?”

“I dropped off Kaneki’s notes, but...he wasn’t there.”

“Yeah? You know, I haven’t heard from him for a bit.” Hide’s usual smile was gone and replaced with a faint frown of concern. “He really wasn’t?”

“No. Hide-san...you’re good friends right?”

Hide’s smile was back. “Since forever. Why?”

“I was curious I guess; Kaneki doesn’t seem like the type to blow off a lecture. Do you think he’s sick or in trouble?” You tried to keep a vague tone, casually concerned and ignorant of anything having to do with the subject of your conversation.

“Maybe sick. Kaneki’s not the kind of guy who’d let people know he was in trouble anyway.” Hide sighed. “I wonder if this has anything to do with that girl…”

“Huh?”

“Kaneki met this really cute girl at this coffee shop she always goes to; it’s a nice place, Anteiku. I wonder if he’s holed up in his room heartbroken; he’s a bit clueless when it comes to girls, so maybe something bad happened with their date…”

You spent the next week exhausting yourself on making a decision; it’s not like you knew Kaneki. He wasn’t hunting you; he hadn’t even shown up for class once again. It seemed like you were free to just ignore the whole fiasco.

“Hello, what can I get you?”

You smiled up at the barista. “I’d like an ice coffee with sugar and cream.”

“Of course,” the girl didn’t bother pushing back the hair from her face as she wrote and read over her orders. “Is that all?”

“That’s all.”

“Your order should be ready in a few minutes.”

“Thank you.” You nodded and began taking your textbook from your book bag, feeling distinctly awkward. The cafe had just opened up for business.

“Was I expecting him to be here this early? Even if he was, what would I say?” You thought to yourself as you thumbed through the heavy books pages for the right chapter. A few minutes passed and you were given your drink; you were starting to feel a bit foolish.
“Well, at least the coffee’s good…” You sipped at your sweet drink; the overall atmosphere was very comforting. In this nicely lit, cozy cafe, it seemed as if Kaneki and his plight were a million miles away.

“Sorry I’m late Touka, I-”

Your delayed reaction was shared by Kaneki, who on reflex swooped in to dab the stained pages with a napkin.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t know-how did you-?” Kaneki’s hand trembled and he twisted the soaked cloth, quickly pulling back from you. “I-”

“Kaneki, what the hell’s your problem?!” Touka saw the damage and started mopping up the remainder of the mess with her own handkerchief. “Miss, I’m so sorry, this guy’s new and a klutz-”

“It’s no trouble, I can still read it…” You trailed off as you caught Kaneki’s gaze; a medical patch was covering the left eye. “I heard from Hide you liked to go here, but I didn’t know you actually worked here too.”

“Y-yeah…I just started.”

Touka looked back and forth between you two with a shrewd, somewhat anxious gaze.

“Kaneki,” You began quietly. “I wanted to ask about your...condition. You know, you seemed so sick that time and-”

Kaneki’s eyes were glued to your face in apprehension; he gave Touka a somewhat fearful sideways glance. She narrowed her eyes and frowned.

“She knows?”

Kaneki’s body shook. “Touka, it’s not what you think, she just walked in while I was still sick!”

“Do you know? Did you see his eye?!”

The stern voice was directed at you this time.

“I...saw Kaneki’s eye.”

“No! Touka, she doesn’t know what she’s saying-!”

“Shut up Kaneki!” Touka’s glare was cold. “You know what I have to do. This is for our safety.”

“NO!”

You drew back; Touka’s eyes were transformed and glowing red on a backdrop of pitch black. Kaneki stepped forward as Touka reached for you, but a calm voice cut through the tension.

“Touka, please step away from our customer.”

“Yoshimura.”

“Let go dumbass!” Touka wrung her arm from Kaneki’s grip; she looked down at the ground begrudgingly. “Sir, this human knows about his eye.”

“I heard.” Yoshimura said simply. “Miss, are you a friend of Kaneki?”
You looked at them all; you had no idea what to do.

“...I..we go to the same class at the university. I went to drop off some notes from a class he missed...Kaneki, are you okay?” You looked at him. “You looked like you were in a lot of pain; I didn’t call the CCG.” you added more toward all of them. “Look, I don’t want any trouble. I was worried, Kaneki seemed scared. I thought maybe I would see you here. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Hm…” Yoshimura came forward and put a hand gently on Touka’s shoulder. “Let’s refrain from any drastic measures...for now.”

Touka stared at him in disbelief, but Yoshimura’s firm gaze told her there was no room for arguments. Instead, she turned to Kaneki and you.

“Have you told anyone then?”

You shook your head. “I thought they might try to hurt him.”

Touka’s glare faltered slightly; she huffed and turned away. “Fine, whatever. I’ll get your receipt.”

Yoshimura smiled genially. “Miss, I presume from your response you already understand why we as ghouls need to keep our true nature’s secret?”

You nodded quickly. “Yes, I do. I’m sorry, I swear the last thing I want to do is hurt anyone. I don’t know Kaneki well, but I can tell he’s a good guy. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Very well. Kaneki, as soon as you’re done talking with this young lady I need you to start wiping down the windows and check inventory.”

“Yes sir.” Kaneki bowed his head, shoulders still tense as he turned to face you. “I...I’m really sorry.”

“Wow...so you’re a ghoul.” You ran a hand through your hair and laughed weakly. “Never would have guessed. Thanks for not eating me earlier...”

“We don’t hunt humans here! We...” Kaneki’s voice cracked. “We only eat the bodies of people who commit suicide...the only other thing we can consume is coffee. I...”

You frowned as tears formed in his eye.

“I almost killed you. Please, forgive me...”

“Kaneki, it’s okay. You didn’t want to; you’re okay now though right? You looked like you were hurting back there.”

“I’m okay now...why did you come looking for me?”

You smiled a bit awkwardly. “I really was worried. You looked terrified and sick...I couldn’t just forget it. Does Hide know?”

Kaneki shook his head rapidly. “He can’t know. I don’t know how he’d even...” he looked over his shoulder, but Touka was behind the counter, busy and looking seriously troubled. “We can’t let people know, even Hide. Besides, if he knew,”

Kaneki bit his lip and averted his somber eyes to the floor. “I...I’m a monster now.”
“Come on, you’re not a monster.” You said with a incredulous glare. “You can’t help what you need
to eat; it sounds like you guys don’t want to hurt anyone. You just got the short end of the stick as far
as I can tell.”

Actually,” you rifled through your bag, glad that you hadn’t taken out your folder of notes, seeing as
you had almost ruined your book. “I copied these notes for you; Hide was going to, but I told him I
could just do it since I still hadn’t paid you back for lending me yours earlier.”

“But, that day.” Kaneki winced at the memory. “You dropped the notes. Um, thanks for bringing
them.”

“No problem.” You chuckled at his shy expression. “I’m fine; still kinda in shock, but overall I’m
just glad you’re not dead or something.”

"...thank you."

Kaneki offered you a small, uneasy smile back; this was the Kaneki you knew and liked.

Timid, mild, bookish, and kind.

Then there was the other Kaneki you would come to know.

Confident, strong, calculating, and ruthless.

That was the Kaneki you would learn to fear.
Author’s Note: Spoilers for season two of the anime.

“I have business to see to.”

“Hey, you can’t just go off on your own.” Ayato sneered as Kaneki began walking off without so much as a glance. “Who does this asshole-?”

“Ayato, drop it. We’re done here.” Tatara said lowly as he kicked the side of a dead CCG member; there was a lot of food in the area now. “Hey, Eyepatch.”

Kaneki paused in his tracks.

“Go on.”

Kaneki nodded once without turning around and disappeared in a blur; Ayato glowered after him and turned to stomp on the hand of a half dead soldier reaching out for him. He ground his boot into the man’s splayed fingers, unsatisfied by the loud crunch and the cry of pain as blood gushed like a geyser from the wound.

“Bastard…”

Kaneki had already taken off his mask as he made his escape.

“No, not escape.” he reminded himself as he tucked away the mask in his inner pocket, the large jacket effectively covering the blood staining his shirt and pants. “I chose to go. This is a detour.”

Kaneki knew he would have to be cautious; he decided it’d be best to avoid Anteiku for the time being.

“We can’t see them yet. Not yet.”

“Are you going to eat her?”

“No.”

“Don’t tell me you’re satisfied already?” the soft voice was childishly sulky. “You know, her skin looks so soft…”

“Be quiet.”

“So shy still! I remember when you started looking at it. I know if you’d let me free, I’d sink my teeth in and devour her whole…” a soft, breathy sigh. “Kaneki… I know you share my tastes to some degree…”

“I said to shut up.”

“She’d probably let you…”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!”

Kaneki grabbed at his hair and bit his tongue.
“Just shut up. I would never betray her…”

Kaneki breathed deep and kept walking, stuffing his hands in his pockets; there wasn’t many people milling around in your neighborhood so late and he was relieved. It wouldn’t be good for someone to get suspicious and call the authorities.

“No one will ruin this tonight. No one.”

Not Rize, not the CCG, not Aogiri, not even his friends. None of them mattered, not now.

Kaneki easily leapt to the ledge of the third floor; it was summer and you had left your bedroom window ajar to let in the air. He carefully raised it just enough for him to swing his body inside feet first; he landed on his feet without so much as a sound.

You were asleep, textbook on the other side of your bed along with your phone, low on battery and halfway to the charger; Kaneki smiled in faint amusement before lightly shaking your shoulder.

“It’s time to wake up…” he said softly, putting a hand gently over your mouth to keep you from screaming. Luckily for him, you only jumped slightly under your blankets, immediately recognizing your rouge friend.

“Kaneki.” You beamed and threw your arms around him tightly. “Oh my god...everyone’s so worried, Touka and Hinami and-”

“I need you to keep your voice down.” Kaneki pressed a fingertip to your lip; despite his firm tone, you could see his eyes dance with subdued emotion. “I’m sorry; did Touka tell you why I left?”

You frowned. “Yes...Kaneki, I wish you...I wish you would stay. We miss you so much; I’m scared. I feel like any day I’ll get news that you’ve been killed.”

“You know why I’m doing this.” Kaneki’s monotone voice held no room for compromise; his hand tilted your chin to make you look him in the eye. “I won’t stand by and let you suffer for what I am. I’ve made my decision.”

You blinked, unwilling to look into his eyes; they were so flat now. Kaneki didn’t seem to realize how much you missed him, not just how he had left to join Aogiri, but him as a person.

This young man in front of you felt like a stranger, a corrupted shadow of the man you knew.

“Kaneki...will you just be careful?”

He stared at you silently for a moment; to your surprise, he smiled. It wasn’t the kind, timid smile of the past, but this one was just as warm and soft. His eyes took in your face hungrily and for an inkling of a second, you felt fear as he leaned in.

“I can never repay you for what you’ve done. Do you remember the first day you came to Anteiku?”

“Of course.”

Things seemed to be looking up in those days. Kaneki was opening himself to you more and more everyday. Hinami would join you and ask for help with her reading, Nishiki would crack jokes, even Touka would smile at you now and then when her guard was down and she felt like you wouldn’t judge her. Little by little, everyone was coping as best as they could.

“Where did that all go?”
“How could I ever forget?” You felt tears form in your eyes; before you could raise your hand to wipe them, Kaneki’s thumb swiped across your cheek gently. He sighed and you saw a trace of guilt in his gaze.

“Do you realize how it made me feel to know you had come there for me?”

You blinked away lingering tears. “I...I was worried.”

“It meant so much to me...don’t you realize that? You barely even knew me, but you wanted to make sure I was alright. The kindness I so rarely received was given to me three times over with that one gesture and you never left my side since.”

Kaneki was still stroking his thumb along your cheek, though the tears had ceased to fall.

“Kaneki...” You didn’t know what to say to that; this was the first time since his capture you had seen him so emotional. It warmed your heart to know a part of the tender, romantic Kaneki was still there deep down.

“Don’t cry. Everything’s going to be okay soon; I didn’t just come here to check up on you...”

“What’s going to happen?”

“When I was captured...he threatened to take you.” Kaneki’s light grey eyes turned steely. “I can’t risk something like that happening again. Come with me.”

“What?”

“If you stay by me, I’ll be able to protect you; you can stay hidden when I have to do a job. You’re vulnerable here.” Kaneki’s tone was bitter, almost self deprecating. “I was so weak before, but it’s different now. I’ll do anything to keep you safe; we can be happy again someday.”

You could hardly believe what he was saying; he smiled. It was so full of love.

“We can be together this way; it’ll be better this way-”

“How the hell would you know?”

Kaneki flinched as you forced his hand away.

“You left us. We need you here; and what makes you think I’d want to come and be involved in that-that...” You shook your head and grit your teeth. “I’d just get in your way; those other Aogiri members might try to use me against you. Kaneki, why can’t you just-?”

“Just what?”

“Just...” You sighed. “What am I saying? You’re a ghoul now. Kaneki, this is all so crazy; you’re going to get burned.”

“Are you rejecting me?”

You gasped as his hand grabbed your face, fingers digging into your cheeks; his eyes bored into yours. His left eye shined red in the dim light.

“Don’t you see this is all for you? I’m doing this to keep you safe, I’m trying to make it so we can be together and you want to ruin all of that?”
“Kaneki, what you’re doing isn’t going to help. It’s causing more panic among the humans and the CCG; the guys at Anteiku—”

“I DON’T CARE!”

Kaneki pushed you down to the bed, his hands pinning your arms to the blanket; you tried to kick him off with your legs, but your strength was nothing compared to his.

“The most important thing is that you live…”

You felt your heart sink and a lump swell in your throat as his tears dripped down his nose and onto your face.

“You have to continue living for me, you can’t just abandon me. Please, let me do this for you!”

“For me or for you?”

Kaneki smiled down at you, his lips trembling as he choked back a weak laugh.

“Isn’t it the same? Why are you forcing me to go this far?” he let most of his weight rest against you as his arms looped around your shoulders to keep your arms tight to your sides. “Why can’t you accept me like you did that day?”

You said nothing as Kaneki’s teeth grazed your neck.

“Don’t make me do something drastic.”

The frigidity of his words made you paralyzed. “If you won’t let me save you, then I won’t allow anyone else to hurt you.”

Your body shook as he pulled back to stare at you fully.

“You’re so beautiful to me. I can’t let you become too deeply entangled in this…don’t you understand, what was left of myself would die….”

Was this your fault for a thoughtless act of kindness? Was it because you were human and unable to fight against him or any other ghoul? Was it bound to happen no matter what the circumstance?

Was this really the price of becoming precious to a soul so far gone?

“They could kill you, unless you stay close; but if I eat you, you’ll become a part of me anyway.”

Kaneki’s eyes only reflected you.

“So…which is it?”
Male!Mikan Tsumiki

His smile was so wide, but you couldn’t see an ounce of happiness in it; the other children sure
didn’t notice, or more likely they just didn’t care.

You felt your insides scramble uncomfortably as Mikan stood half naked and trembling as they threw
pebbles at the circles on his chest. The center circle was worth ten points.

“I won!” One of the smaller children managed to throw the pebble hard enough to break the skin and
blood began to rise from the wound; even so, he never stopped smiling.

A girl with dulled eyes looked on and huffed. “This is getting so boring. And his smile is creepy.”
The children began to walk away, and as soon as they did, Mikan’s smile dropped.

“Wait!”

Your mouth screwed into a frown as he nearly tripped over himself in an attempt to catch up to them;
his legs were numb from standing for so long.

“You can do more if you want! What about using sharp sticks like last time?!” Mikan asked. “I-I’m
sorry I’m so boring….I’m sure I can-”

“Get away!” The girl snatched away the hem of her dress; Mikan had fallen just behind her, trying to
grasp her hand, but instead pulling her skirt. She glared down at him and he whimpered in pain for
the first time, even though she didn’t lay a finger on him.

“You’re just...pathetic!” The girl spat out; the other children followed her lead, and despite your
disgust, you briefly wondered if maybe the girl had felt it herself.

“How can’t they see how wrong this is?” You wondered as Mikan sobbed into his hands, sitting in
the dirt; the bandage on his knee was peeling off and you were struck with the urge to fix it.

But the girl, the other children, the teachers, the whole town it seemed were right; Mikan was
pathetic. A pathetic, pitiful child, who’s life goal seemed to be letting others walk all over him and do
his best to appear as sympathetic and weak as possible.

“He can’t be that weak.” You looked on as Mikan sobbed shakily, still sprawled out on the ground;
you felt even more uncomfortable. Boys weren’t supposed to do that, weren’t they? At least not boys
his age, and definitely not in the open where anyone could see and mock them. “He was able to
withstand the pain…but does that mean he just enjoys it? He can’t enjoy it, it’s not right.”

Mikan had gone to school with you since the first grade and he had always been the same, perhaps
even more pitiful as the years went by; no the both of you were a couple years from attending high
school and he seemed to be perpetually stuck in a innocent, vulnerable state. And the most
perplexing part was that he appeared to be doing everything in his power to keep it that way and you
couldn’t fathom why.

“Hey.” You found yourself standing a foot away from Mikan, hands fisted in your pockets
awkwardly.

“A-am I in your way?! I’m so sorry, I’ll-” Mikan scrambled up and fell over, legs spread and shirt
pushed up to expose his abs. “Oh god, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to!”
“It’s fine.” You turned your head away with a disturbed expression. “Why does he keep falling like that?”

“I’ll go...or do you want to play the game too?” Mikan sat up quickly, choppy bangs plastered to his forehead from sweat. “Please, don’t be mad!”

“Dammit, I’m not mad!” You tugged a packet of tissues from your pocket. “I just wanted to-!”

“Throw those at me? Yes, okay.” Mikan nodded and kneeled down in front of you with the same wide smile he previously had. “Or do you want me to choke on them? I’m sorry, I really am, I’ll do whatever you want!”

“....they’re so you can wipe your face. You’re crying.”

You kneeled down in front of him and slowly held the tissues to him. “I don’t want you to do anything, just takes these, okay?”

“Um, I-I-” Mikan’s smile fell and his hands trembled as he took the packet in both his hands; he genuinely didn’t seem to know what to make of it, as if he had never seen a pack of tissues in his life. “I don’t understand...a-are you upset with me? I...” his voice broke off in a tight sob, and clutched the pack in his fingers; he looked terrified.

“Mikan,” You sighed lightly and stood up; there just didn’t seem to be any point in trying to explain. In the past, he would experience a rare occurrence of civility. Usually it was something mundanely simple; a girl in your second grade class bumped into him and apologized casually, so he broke down in tears. The teacher let him borrow a pencil and he shook like a leaf and refused to take it and sat outside the room for the remainder of the school day.

To avoid Mikan panicking, you decided to just walk away; it wasn’t worth the fuss in the first place, but you never did quite get used to the way Mikan let himself be abused and how everyone around you seemed just as content to either ignore it or join in on the torment.

The next day Mikan sat hunched in his desk, hands clasped together in his lap and head bowed until his forehead seemed to touch the desk surface. He let the same group of children mock and victimize him with a wide smile on his face; you kept yours turned away almost in defiance. You wouldn’t let him make you feel guilty.

“I tried to be nice to him, but he just won’t have it.” You told yourself on the last day of school; Mikan stood in the crowd, but no family members were there to take pictures of him in front of the school’s gate and no friends to bid farewell. “We probably won’t even be going to the same school now...I won’t have to see him again. And who knows, maybe he’ll even make some friends who don’t know him.”

But you knew that he would most likely purposely invoke anger and disgust from new classmates anyway. He would most likely make himself the perfect target, would go out of his way to appear vulnerable and easily pushed around; it was the only thing Mikan looked able to do. You were almost certain that he all but relished the pain and humiliation, by whatever twisted logic had been imprinted in his mind. You weren’t going to try to find out.
You woke up feeling groggy and numb; you tried to move an arm, but realized you couldn’t even feel it. You couldn’t even shield your eyes from the bright light once your eyelids opened; at least you could do that much.

“U-um...are you awake?”

The snivelling voice made you shoot up, or it would if you could move; all your body managed was to jerk upward and nearly fall off the hospital bed.

“I’m so sorry for starting you! I’m the nurse aid, I should know better, I’m so stupid, I-” Mikan looked ready to bolt from the room, but suddenly calmed down enough to take a few deep breaths that sounded more like him hyperventilating.

“Do you need a nurse’s aid?” You asked slowly. “Mikan, is that really you? What’s going on?”

“Y-you fainted in the middle of your class.”

“Fain-oh.” You remembered feeling your stomach cramp up, and your vision going blurry, but you didn’t actually remember hitting the ground or anything. “I feel so tired…”

“You hit your head.” Mikan’s voice shook ever so slightly; you had to admit, you were surprised it wasn’t worse. Comparing to his previous demeanor, he seemed almost calm, at least for him. “Your head….split on the corner...surgery…”

You were able to piece together what he meant and tried to sit up once more; you knew the doctor probably gave you anesthesia to knock you out so they’d be able to perform the procedure. After a second you looked back up at Mikan curiously.

“Will I be okay?” You tried to sound as nonthreatening as possible and it seemed to have worked; Mikan was maybe smiling as he nodded.

“The surgery went well. You just need rest...is there anything I can get you? A-are you hungry?”

“A bit.” You admitted and refrained from blanching as Mikan fell face down, exposing his admittedly sculpted behind and back muscles to you.

“So s-sorry, I’ll be right back! Please forgive me!” Mikan scuttled out the door and left you alone; the room was just like any hospital room, sterile, brightly lit, colors consisting mostly of white and steel equipment. You tried to move your head to look down; the blanket was pulled to your chin and tucked into the sides of the bed; a glass vase was placed on the nightstand with fresh flowers.

“It’s nice, but I wish there was a window somewhere.” Being immobilized and groggy was bad enough, but then your stomach began to grumble. “Is there a mirror anywhere...do I have a scar now?” you wondered in exasperation. Mikan was back shortly, fidgeting with his uniform; it looked cute on him. In fact, he had grown up as attractive as a model, but he still had the same air of self conscious panic. It was a shame really.

“Can you move at all?” Mikan gulped as though worried you’d hit him from that question.

“Just a bit still...I like the flowers.” You tried to smile kindly; to your shock, Mikan managed a wobbly smile back.

“I picked them out. If you don’t like them, I can get better ones!” Mikan added hurriedly. “Wait, I-
I’m sorry, you just said you liked them and I’m making you repeat yourself! Oh god, I’m sorry!”

“Don’t strip, you’re a doctor!”

“I’M SORRY!!!” Mikan kneeled down beside your bed with teary eyes; you sighed under your breath.

“Mikan, everything’s fine. It was very considerate of you to put flowers in the room.”

“O-okay...your food should be done, I’ll be back!” Mikan rushed out of the room; you felt a slight headache and wondered whether it was from the injury or Mikan’s groveling.

“I guess he hasn’t changed much at all…” You decided to get comfortable and try not to think about it;

Just as you were about to fall back asleep, Mikan came bustling through the room with a cart loaded down with food.

“Oh wow, thanks.” You said lowly as you strained your neck to get a closer look; you experimentally moved your fingers and they only twitched slightly. “Mikan, this is some strong stuff they gave me...will I even be able to eat anything?”

“Y-you should!” Mikan nearly dropped the spoon he was using to stir sugar into your tea; the spoon tinkled against the ceramic cup. Once the sound stopped, you tried to peer over at the tray, wondering how Mikan expected you to be able to drink or eat.

“I’m sorry it took so long, it’s been awhile since i’ve been grocery shopping, so I only had so many ingredients to work with.” Mikan said softly. “I’ll go out in a bit and get more later; I can write down a list off all the food you want. Or would you-?”

“Wait, grocery shopping? I thought hospitals had their own food supply for the cafeteria.” You asked with a frown. “Mikan...don’t tell me he’s getting extorted at his own workplace?”

Mikan dropped the cup and it shattered. “I...you’re not...at a hospital anymore.”

“Where am I?” You fought off your rising anxiety as Mikan stopped over calmly to pick up the larger pieces. The tea had seeped into the hardwood floor. “Wait, hospitals usually have tiled floors...and windows. Now that I think about it, I haven’t heard any noise since I’ve woken up...shouldn’t there be other staff members around?”

“You were in the hospital really! But, they told me you’d be discharged….I-I know you might be angry, but-” Mikan paused and reached into his front pocket; he pulled out a pack of unopened tissues. “I remember you were so nice, I’m sure if I apologize, you’d forgive me right? You were the only one who was nice...I used to think you hate me-I’m sorry, that was wrong of me to assume!” Mikan knelted down and bowed his forehead to the ground. “I’ll make it up to you, tell me what you want! I can get you some different food, or softer sheets, anything at all….wouldn’t you like that?”

Mikan crawled over to your bed and tentatively laid next to you; he gave you a watery smile as his arms half embraced your body. “You can use me and I’ll always smile for you. You can do anything you want to me. You can take advantage of me, hurt me, take everything, and I promise I’ll still love you.”

You gave him a tense smile. “Mikan, please let me go. That’s what I want. I just want to go home and rest for a bit, okay?”
“No, you’re lying!” Mikan sobbed and curled up closer to you. “You’re supposed to be nice to me! I-I’m sorry, I don’t mean to call you names!” he added quickly. “I’m so, so sorry, but I can’t let you leave; the medication I gave you isn’t lethal or anything...when I can make sure you’ll let me serve you, I’ll lower the dosage.”

If you were able to, you might have shivered. “Mikan, I don’t want to use you...I won’t call the police, I just want to go home, I swear!”

“Why not?! Don’t you think I can handle it?” Mikan asked as he shoved his bandaged arms in your face. “I trust you, I know you won’t break me...I want you to, you have to pay attention to me...” he retracted his arms and buried his face in your numb shoulder. “I need you to have a reason to stay. I don’t know what else to do...”

Mikan’s face flushed. “You could have me do anything, and I’d never leave. I’d like it if you could love me too, but just being here talking to you is so wonderful...” he bit his lip and rubbed a hand up and down your arm despite knowing you wouldn’t feel a thing. “Doesn’t it make you feel happy? Don’t you feel like smiling? I-I’m smiling!”

It was so pathetic it made your stomach churn.

“Mikan, you can’t get away with this, people will look for me!” You didn’t even have a clue where you were. “This is crazy, they’re just tissues!”

“You don’t understand, ever since that day.....I wanted you to notice me again.” Mikan said in a trembling whisper. “I worked really hard to go to school, and become a doctor, and then yesterday you just show up...it was a sign that I’ve been on the right track, that I finally have the chance to prove to you how useful I can be! You can depend on me for everything and just lie here all day, helpless and-”

You jerked over and almost fell off the bed, were it not for the railings on either side.

“N-no, you’ll fall!” Mikan grabbed you and your face was mashed against his hard chest. “S-sorry! Stay here, I’ll get more medicine and some groceries.”

Before he disappeared out the room, he stepped back inside and smiled, his cheeks flushed bright pink; he had never looked so lively in all the years you had known him.

“I’ll be back soon....I-I have to lock the door now, please forgive me by the time I get back!”

He bowed and rushed away, leaving you to listen to his light footsteps and the echo of a door closing on you, trapping you.
It had all started simply enough.

As a slave, you spent your days either cleaning at mealtimes or dancing for parties and celebrations; while it was true that you didn’t have much, you still hoped to be able to return home someday.

The day you met Judar, all hope was lost.

You could remember it so clearly; he could often be seen lounging around the palace or off training or just annoying the Empress. You barely knew him of course; he was just another magi, another demanding master you had to serve.

“Damn it all!”

Judas burst into the sitting room, practically knocking down the doors. “That old hag knows I hate vegetables, but she keeps sneaking them into my food!” he fumed and you found yourself frozen in place as his eyes landed on you. “What the hell are you staring at?”

“How was your day Master Judar?”

You could’ve taken one of those ice shards and stabbed yourself; you hadn’t meant to say that at all.

Judas glowered at you.

“Uh, sorry-”

“If you must know, it was awful! If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a thousand times!” Judas walked over to you. “I don’t eat vegetables! They taste like shit.”

“You’re a magi, aren’t you Master Judas?” You asked timidly. “I’m sure Empress Kougyoku means well...you need to keep up your strength after all…”

Judas scowled. “Whatever. If she wants to help me, she can stock up on more peaches or meats or-”

Since that day, you had become his sound board; nearly every time he came to the palace, Judas would find you and spend hours ranting and venting his frustrations. You mostly listened, though sometimes he’d request for you to fix him something to eat or demanded you let him use your lap as a pillow while he rested.

“Honestly, these fools make me want to bash my head against the wall.” Judas sighed heavily; you wordlessly massaged his temples with your fingers. You didn’t feel embarrassed or off put by his request; after all, you were just a servant.

“It’s funny.” Judas’s voice had lowered suddenly; you blinked in surprise, but made sure not to show it.

“I could’ve been in your place, couldn’t I?” Judas said absently. “Apparently, my hometown was the sticks. I had parents, but Al-Thamen killed them with everyone in the village. I don’t remember them; I wonder what they did for a living. Probably farmers.”

You stared down at him; his eyes were closed and he looked to be trying to recall something.

“Not that I’m complaining.” Judas smirked, leaning his head deeper into your lap. “I would’ve never
learned to wield this power; like I’d ever want to live and die in some ghost town.” he looked up at you; despite his careless tone, his eyes were pensive. “Still, I didn’t have a choice either way. Kinda pisses me off…”

“...Are you happy now though?” You were feeling quite sad for him. True, his nature was cruel, almost unbelievably so; frankly, he was an arrogant and spoiled jerk.

“But he lost his family.” You looked on curiously as Judar sat up. “He was raised by the Al-Thamen. He’s never known anything else; maybe he doesn’t care much, but it sounds awful to me…”

You thought of your own family and felt pain shoot through your chest.

“Hey, don’t look like that.” Judar raised your chin up with a playful smirk. “Tell you what, next time I’m over, I’ll let you have one of my peaches.”

You were shocked he even noticed.

A week later, Judar had a sack of peaches slung over his shoulder; he was feeling so giddy, he used his magic to levitate to your quarters.

“What a foolish woman, feeling sad for me.” Judar thought with a chuckle.

He couldn’t quite explain his attachment to you; perhaps it was because you were the only woman who had ever given him consideration. You were the only one who cared about his problems, the only person who listened. Judar sighed; he remembered the times he had gotten bored of talking and asked you to entertain him; the way your limbs twisted and bent and swayed to soft music was tantalizing.

“Such a way of dancing. It really pisses me off others have seen it.” Judar scowled to himself. “I should have the old hag give her to me. I’m sure she’d like to get out of the palace, see the world. She’d always be by my side; she’ll never be sad again!”

“Hello Master Judar.”

“Hey.”

Judar’s mood deflated at the way you addressed him.

“How was your day?”

Judar grunted; you assumed he wasn’t in the mood for conversing.

“Are we not close?”

Your head jerked up to look at him. “Master Judar?”

He sneered. “It’s always ‘Master’ this and ‘Master’ that. Just call me by my damn name and be done with it! You call every man that steps foot into this place as a guest master…”

“Well, I’m just a servant. It’s not my place-”

“Did I ask for your opinion?!”

You gasped in pain as he threw you down to the floor; an ice pick was held to your face.
“Perhaps I should disfigure you as punishment for back talking me?” Judar laughed darkly. “This way, no other man will ever look at her again.”

“I’m sorry!” You croaked; one of his hands was squeezing your throat. “Please, J-Judar!”

“You need to understand something.” Judar growled. “You belong to me. If you try to act otherwise, you’re dead.”

Suddenly, Judar withdrew the ice. “On second thought, that won’t do…”

You looked up at him in relief, but was soon filled with dread at his smile.

“If you try to run away from me, I’ll just kill your family. I can find out where they are.”

“No!” You shrieked, shaking your head fervently; he seemed to become excited by your struggling.

“How ridiculous!” Judar laughed; he sat you up and cupped your face almost tenderly. “I know you choose me. You don’t have to worry about your status, not with me. If I want us to be together, than we will be.”

“I’ll do anything.”

“You know, the other palace servants let me do whatever I want with them…” Judar smiled thinly when you tried to yank yourself away with a sob. “Hey, I won’t force you right away.”

Your forehead fell to his shoulder, your tears soaking through his shirt.

“Kill me…” You begged through your sobs. “Just kill me then.”

Judar felt his body go cold.

“Why are you saying that? Stop it! Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

You couldn’t contain the tears streaming down your face at the fear of being violated; Judar’s face was screwed up in rage.

“SHUT UP!!!”

Judar’s hands grabbed your arms and shaking you roughly; his eyes were wide with anger and hurt.

“I know you love me! I know it, so stop fucking around with me! What was it all for? What was it all for, you listening to me and dancing for me and…” Judar let out a strangled howl; it felt like your shoulders would pop out from their sockets. “You don’t think I’ll do it?! I’ll gut you and burn down your whole village if I want to!”

“He doesn’t care.” You realized hopelessly. “I have to be strong for them. I have to…”

“I’m sorry!” You leaned into him, fighting to keep in your tears. “It just scares me when you’re angry. I won’t run away, I swear!”

Judar had stopped shaking you, but his breathing was shallow and harsh.

“I love you Judar.” You closed your eyes and kissed his lips chastely.

When you pulled away, Judar was grinning; without warning he began kissing you, his lips practically smothering your own.
“There now, was that so hard?” Judar chuckled; with a blissful sigh he pulled you down with him onto the bed. His smile was angelic.

You shook you head silently.

“So shy…silly girl.” Judar trailed his hand up and down your arm; he undid his braid and let his hair fall around you, tickling your skin. “Oh well, we’ll have plenty of time for you to get used to my touch when we’re traveling together.”

You couldn’t bring yourself to cry anymore, feeling completely drained. You knew you would never see your home again.

“Ah, almost forgot.” Judar smiled and took a peach out of the sack; he tore open the soft flesh of the fruit and offered you a piece. You blushed in embarrassment as he fed it to you and licked the juice off your lips; he smiled and snuggled into you. The fruit tasted like ash.

“Mine.”
“Eh, I don’t suppose you have any...other most beautiful women?” Alibaba grinned awkwardly at the madame.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Elizabeth is our most popular dancing girl.”

Alibaba gave a polite smile to the hulking dancer standing shyly behind the the skeptical woman. “I’m afraid...she is simply too far out of my price range!” Alibaba said quickly. “Perhaps another beauty of lesser expense...?”

“Hmph, very well.” the older woman waved off Elizabeth and called out to you. “Girl, get over here and entertain this gentleman.”

“Hello master.” You stepped out from your spot and bowed lowly to Alibaba with a timid smile. “May I dance for you? Or would you like me to fetch you food?”

The madame sighed lightly. “Could you please at least pretend you have an audible voice?”

“I’m sorry ma’am, master!” You bowed your head.

“Please Madame, she’s doing just fine.” Alibaba smiled kindly at you; your shoulders seemed to loosen up somewhat. Alibaba was honestly a bit taken aback; after all, this house wasn’t a brothel, merely a home for men to be entertained by beautiful women and good hospitality. Were you afraid he would dishonor you?

“Just get to it.” the woman waved and was off to see to her other customers; you kept your head down and kneeled at Alibaba’s side.

“Master, I apologize, please let me know what I can do to please you.”

Alibaba blinked slowly; you were not like the usually the brazen nymphs that filled the dwelling with tinkling laughter and charming smiles.

“I bet you’re new here, right?”

You nodded briefly, not daring to look up.

“Please raise your eyes; and while you’re at it sit down with me.” Alibaba felt an odd protectiveness over this you; one thing was certain, you didn’t seem to belong there.

“Yes master.” You perched gracefully on the edge of your seat, ready to stand up should you be requested to do anything.

“Ah, call me Alibaba would you? That master thing is way too formal for my tastes.”

“Oh, if you wish.” You nodded but kept your body stiff.

Alibaba took a sip of his drink and gazed at you with visible curiosity. “Do you mind if I ask what you’re doing here?”

“I...what do you mean?”

“You don’t seem like you’re one for this kind of profession.” Alibaba shrugged; he quickly patted
your shoulder as you looked down fearfully. “Hey, don’t be upset, I like you. You just seem so unhappy here. Would you tell me what’s wrong?”

“Alibaba,” You met his gaze with your own. “I can tell you’re a kind person. I understand this is a place strictly for entertainment, but I feel so odd being stared at...I’m not as confident as the others. The only reason I took this job was to make ends meet...”

“I understand.” Alibaba said gently. “Please don’t feel self conscious. You’re so cute and you’re demeanor is endearing. I bet you get a lot of customers~!”

You laughed softly. “Not very many. I wish…”

“What?”

“I shouldn’t be talking like this.” you glanced around worriedly for the madame. “It’s completely unprofessional.”

“I’m paying for your time, aren’t I?”

You looked up suddenly at Alibaba’s forceful tone. “Well, yes-”

“Then if I want to spend it talking with you and learning about you than I will.” Alibaba winked. “Come on, share these with me!” Alibaba insisted as he held out a platter of fruits to you; after a second you took a stem of grapes. To Alibaba’s surprise you sat down right next to him.

“Please, allow me.” You blushed heavily as you held them to his mouth carefully; Alibaba laughed brightly and ate one with gusto.

Days passed on like this; the two of you would converse and as time went by, Alibaba almost felt as if he was the one providing entertainment. You pleaded with him to tell the tales of his travel, his companions, and the extraordinary battles and magic he encountered along the way.

You were the perfect audience; you’d gasp in awe, laugh in amusement, and even shed tears at all the right places. When he wasn’t telling you about his escapades, Alibaba urged you to tell him of her own life. He learned what you wanted more than anything was to be able to go off on your own as he had done and live your life freely.

“You’ve met so many wonderful people.” you held your cheeks in your hands as he finished his story of the first meeting with Aladdin and the captured dungeon. “It’s so amazing; I wish I could set off on my own adventures…”

Alibaba put an arm around your shoulder and popped a slice of orange into your mouth. “But then you would never be able to see me again.” he grinned roguishly; you would simply giggle and they would continue the session until he had to leave once more.

On the night Alibaba was to leave the town, the peaceful routine was disrupted.

“She’s gonna be so excited!” Alibaba was carrying his belongings with him already; he didn’t have much in the first place, so he was planning on leaving with you as soon as possible.

He walked into the brightly lit establishment and his eyes widened at the sight of several women crowding in a corner. There was a man brandishing a small cut glass; he was standing in front of you, slashing the blade threateningly.

“I’m not paying you to drop all my food!” he growled; the girls were all too scared to come any
closer and the madame was nowhere in sight.

“I’m so sorry...forgive me master, I’ll get you a fresh plate.” you reached down to pick up the shattered plate with trembling hands; before you could stoop any lower, the man yanked you upright by the wrist.

“If you can’t even hold a little platter of food without dropping it, maybe you’re in the wrong line of work.” the man grinned cruelly and lowered your arm to the table. He raised the cut glass high above his head and aimed it at the juncture of your wrist.

“Please, don’t!” you shrieked clenching your eyes closed as you desperately tried to take your hand back.

“This will teach you to-”

A few moments passed in complete silence; you slowly opened your eyes. The man was still above you, but his grip was slack. You quickly pulled away and stared in horror as droplets of blood stained the table’s surface.

“Hey now, don’t be scared.” Alibaba smiled warmly as he withdrew his sword from the man’s spine; he dropped to the floor with a thud. The other women scattered about to their respective rooms, leaving you to stand there dumbly as Alibaba wiped his blade on the man’s shirt.

“Let’s go.”

“W-what?” you had backed up against the wall with a fearful stare. “Alibaba...you just-”

“You don’t.” he said lowly. “He was going to hurt you. What would you expect me to do?”

You glanced back and forth between the dead body and Alibaba’s sword.

“I want to take you away from this place.” Alibaba sheathed his weapon and slowly made his way toward you. “You don’t have to stay in this place. You can come with me.” Alibaba cupped her face in his hands. “I can protect you.”

“Alibaba, I-I…” you couldn’t keep your eyes off the corpse just rotting away on the carpet. “How could you just do that so easily? I don’t even know who you are anymore…”

“I can give you your freedom.” Alibaba took the hand he had just saved from being severed. “I’ve already saved you.”

“Is he trying to make me feel guilty?” you had long ago took note of the cunningness Alibaba possessed from his stories, but you had no idea he could be so ruthless. “But is it really such a problem? That man might’ve killed me; this is my one chance for freedom! I can’t let it go now…”

“Are you in there?” Alibaba asked playfully.

You stood up straight and matched his gaze eye for eye. “Take me away from here.”

Alibaba’s face was ecstatic; in less than a few minutes later, you were running by Alibaba’s side with your meager belongings and what was left of your wages. The two of you would take a rest stop in the next village over and plan the route from there.

“Just imagine it, we can do this forever.” Alibaba brushed your hair from your face; you camped out in the outskirts of the neighboring town. You smiled hesitantly and buried your face in his neck,
hoping he wouldn’t notice the slight trembling of your shoulders.

“Yes.” you replied absently as Alibaba kissed your forehead.

“Just the two of us.” Alibaba promised. “No one will come between our happiness.”
Light Yagami

“Yagami-san, is everything alright?”

Light looked up at you suddenly; he had been reading his textbook silently for the majority of the group work. Well, not really reading; from what you could tell, he wasn’t scanning the words, just staring blankly at the pages of English text.

“Yes, I’m fine.” he gave you a sheepish smile. “Please don’t think I’m trying to slack off; I suppose this material is a bit tedious for me to pay attention to.”

You cocked your head to the side. “Oh that’s good. Not that it’s boring for you, just that you’re feeling well!” you corrected yourself quickly. “I always loved this story honestly, but I suppose it’s a bit childish…”

“No, that’s not it.” Light replied as he idly flipped a page. “I’ve already read this story a few times before this lesson.”

“You read ahead Yagami-san?” you asked; you weren’t shocked, just a bit taken aback he would be interested enough to read forward for a children’s fairy tale.

Light nodded with a humble expression. “I had nothing better to do. I already finished the previous assignment, so I figured I’d just keep reading. Please forgive me for my lack of attention, I know we should both be giving our best effort regardless.”

“No, it’s fine, I don’t think you’re lazy or anything.” You mumbled something; if Light hadn’t been watching your lips move, he might not have known you had said anything.

“Pardon?”

“You’re such a hard worker…of course I’d never think you’d be putting the work onto me.” You gave him a half smile; this wasn’t going how you thought it would at all. “Just great. The smartest and most handsome guy in class got assigned to be my partner and all I can do is be as awkward as ever!”

“You’re giving me way too much credit.” Light chuckled. “After all, you’re the class rep right? You do your work and make sure the classroom is taken care of on top of it. You’re pretty responsible.”

“T-thank you!” you inwardly winced at the way your voice squeaked ever so slightly. “But I’m not really all that….I can never get anyone motivated. No matter how hard I try, they don’t listen.”

Light gave you a unexplainable look; you quickly gave him a small smile.

“But it’s mostly my fault! What’s the point of being class rep if you can’t even stand up for yourself? I just let people walk over me, I never put up much of a fight.” You sighed softly. “I need to be more assertive.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Your eyes flickered to his in confusion. “Yagami-san?”

“Why should you change?” Light’s mouth was set in a thin line. “You’re a perfectly reasonable, capable person. You put a lot of effort in your duties and you respect rules; you would be the perfect
representative if the others paid attention and listened to you.”

“But I never make myself heard.” You said uncertainly. “If I don’t give myself the respect I deserve, how can I expect others-?”

“People should just naturally assume responsibility for their actions.” Light retorted with a subtle sternness to his words that left no room for argument. “Don’t blame yourself for the inconsideration of other people. You are already doing what you should; these other people who take it upon themselves to trample over good, honest people like you, they are the ones that need to be corrected.”

“Be...corrected?” You walked toward your homeroom the next day with Light’s words echoing in your mind. “What did he mean by that? I suppose he has a point....but, he sounded so strict about it. It was a bit weird, not like him at all...”

“Hey class rep.” One of the girls from your homeroom gave you a grin. “I need your counsel on something. Can we talk?”

“Oh, yes, of course.” You nodded as you obediently followed her in the opposite direction of the classroom. “What do you need to talk about?”

“Don’t play dumb.” she dropped her smile as soon as she saw the other students were already in the classroom. “I’m still waiting on the money you owe me.”

“I-I don’t have it!” You looked around fearfully. “Please-”

“God, can you stop the fucking squeaking?! It’s so annoying; if you don’t want to be known as the class whore and the resident mute, you better have it by tomorrow.”

“Please, that’s not true!” You felt tears sting your eyes, but her cold expression didn’t waver. “You-you know it’s not! Why...how can you...you can’t just spread rumors like that-!”

You flinched as she took a small step forward.

“Who says I can’t?” the girl looked sincerely amused. “You? You’re spineless. I should just tell people anyway-”

“No, please!”

“Keep your voice down you stupid bitch!” the girl spat; she looked around warily now, but there was no one else there. “Just have the money and maybe I’ll forget the whole thing.”

She walked off without another word and you burst into angry tears. “Why? Why is this happening to me?! I furiously wiped your eyes and took calming breaths. “How can I just...why does it have to be like this...?”

You slumped against the wall for a few moments gathering your emotions; it didn’t matter. You had to get to class and salvage what pride you had left. When you got home you simply put together as much money as you had; you were a bit short, but at that point you didn’t really care. As long as she got even most of it, she would be more than happy to have something to hang over your head until you paid her the full amount.

The next morning you dawdled at the classroom entrance, waiting for the extortionist to show up; as time went on, the bell for the first class sounded and she wasn’t there. You listened intently to her small group of what you assumed were friends; they talked in low voices during break and one of them burst into tears in the middle of a lesson.
“What’s going on?” You wondered as the next day came around she was still absent; not that you didn’t feel relieved for the reprieve, but you wished she’d just show up so you could get it over with. As you dwelled on your situation, the homeroom teacher stepped inside the room and cleared his throat.

“As a few of you probably noticed, there has been some...unsavory rumors floating around about one of our students. It concerns this new figure, Kira.” he looked around the room and everyone went deadly silent; it was probably the quietest anyone had ever been. “It’s my duty to dispel any confusion and fear; you might as well know the truth before anything gets out of hand. There was an accident…”

You listened with rapt attention as the teacher explained bluntly that your bully had been found in an alleyway, dead from a heart attack.

“A heart attack? There’s no way it wasn’t a Kira killing.” You thought to yourself as you made your way to Light’s house; part of you felt relieved, part of you oddly horrified. “I mean, she’s the same age as me; can someone our age even get heart attacks?”

“Is everything alright?” Light asked you; it was your turn to space out, albeit for different reasons.

“O-oh yes! I’m so sorry, I was just…”

“You were thinking about that girl’s death.”

“I,” You looked away in slight embarrassment. “It’s just a bit scary in a way, but…”

Light set down his notes and pencil gently. “Could I ask you something?”

You raised your eyes timidly. “What is it?”

“That girl was extorting money from you. I heard her,” he added at your bewildered expression. “It’s not a secret what kind of person she was. But now she’s gone; she can never hurt you again. She can never hurt anyone again.”

You lost the ability to do more than stare at him with questioning eyes; what was he trying to say? That you should be glad she died? Perhaps it was true in a sense but still-

“A person like that...don’t you think people like her are better off being away from good, honest people like you? To take advantage of somebody for their own selfish, petty reasons, they shouldn’t be allowed to just get away with that.” Light’s tone was patient as if he were simply explaining a problem from one of the textbooks.

“Well, yes, but...I don’t really understand what you’re saying Yagami-san.” You looked on as he ran a hand through his hair with a sigh.

“Someone like you doesn’t deserve to be treated that way.” Light continued. “Someone like you needs protection; you need guidance and justice for the way you’ve been wrong.” after a moment of hesitation, Light walked over and kneeled before you with a look of determination as he took both your hands in his firmly. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the wicked people of this world and the virtuous were judged as they lived? You’d be rewarded for the kind of person you are and punished for poisoning the world with evil and pain.”

“Yagami-san….do you think Kira is real?” You asked as your knees shook slightly. “Do you think there’s really someone who actually has the power to kill criminals and-and bad people or something?!”
“Don’t talk so loud.” Light said sharply, his grip on your arms tightening almost painfully. “I don’t understand...you seem scared. Don’t you realize you’re safe under this new world order?”

“I don’t want anyone dead!” You shook your head rapidly and felt a tear slip from your and hang on your chin. “That’s not right-you can’t just kill people you think are bad, it’s mur-!”

“Don’t lump me in with lowlifes who kill others for their own selfish reason!” Light harshly whispered, his eyes narrowed into hollow slits. “She deserved to die; you should be on your knees thanking me for saving you!”

The whole room was stifled from the tension; you could hear Light grinding his teeth, feel the restraint of his hold that kept him from bruising your skin. The approaching tears froze as the realization dawned on you.

“You’re Kira. You-” You felt your blood turn to ice; he wasn’t even denying anything. “You killed her...what did you do?!”

“I’ve been bestowed with the power of bringing justice to the world, all with the scribble of a pen.” Light replied calmly; he walked over to his drawer and pulled out a black note book, slowly flipping through the pages. You peered closely as he pointed to a specific name and date; under your tormentors name was the exact location and cause of death. “I thought you of all people would understand...please, you must.” with a tired sigh, he stowed the notebook back in it’s hiding place and seated himself in front of you once more.

You stiffened as he kissed your forehead chastely.

“I did it for you. This world is rotten to the core and there are so many people like you who deserve better. I will take on the burden and create a new world of only virtuous people.”

“Yagami-san, whatever you’re doing, you can’t just kill someone.” You fought to keep your voice from cracking. “Please, don’t do this. You can’t, it’s not right!”

Light actually smiled, almost looking like his regular self again. “Really, you’ll see. Just wait a bit longer and you’ll see I’m right.” he loosened his grip on your hands and brought them to his lips. “I’d appreciate if you didn’t stand in my way; I would regret having to kill someone I love.”

“I-Yagami-san, I want to leave.” You shook him off and practically jumped to the door; before you could touch the doorknob, Light’s hand grabbed yours.

“You understand that at least, right?” Light asked. “That if you say anything to anyone, I’ll have no choice but to do something we’d both regret.”

“.....y-yes.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow. We should schedule a time to meet up and relax.” Light’s whole demeanor was casual as he smiled up at you kindly. “We deserve a break after all the work we’ve done.

“Okay…”

Light watched coldly as you practically ran out of the house in tears.

“Hey, was that a good idea?” Ryuk leaned back on the bed and tilted his head curiously. “That was pretty reckless of you; there’s still a chance she’ll say something to someone.” Ryuk let out a dry cackle. “But then again, I’ve never met a human who didn’t do anything to save their own skins first and foremost…”
“Who would even believe her?” Light shrugged with what could be described as an almost playful smirk. “I’m surprised she even believed me so quickly; then again, not just anyone would have access to the exact place and time of a person’s death.”

Light carefully put away his study materials. “I will make this world a better place; she’ll come to see things my way in time. She’s been brainwashed by society’s tolerant views on such awful behavior.”

“All right.”

Light merely chuckled at Ryuk’s skeptical tone. “People’s emotions can be easily swayed and changed; all I really need to do is show her I’m on her side, that staying by my side is the best choice for both her happiness and survival in the society I plan to form with the Death Note’s power.”

“Human’s…” Ryuk mused as Light took his place at his desk and turned on the television to view the news. “They’ll do just about anything to get what they want, won’t they. It’s pretty funny.”

“The perfect world where we can all live in peace. A world for us to be happy.” Light wrote down names with new vigor. “Whether she agrees on the means or not.”
(Did you guys hear about Mi-kun’s parents and the trial? I can’t believe that happened; it’s so tragic.)

<Yeah, but don’t you think it’s kinda weird how he’s still alive…?>

/Huh? What do you mean?/

/I don’t know, it’s just pretty suspicious how he survived the robbery>/

(I don’t know if this is true, but I heard Mi-kun was able to hide somewhere. I wonder if he heard it…)

/I heard he actually saw it, but he doesn’t seem that affected by it though. Mi-kun had that interview not long after the murders and he seemed barely upset…] /

/Are you guys saying he had something to do with it? That’s just crazy./

/Not necessarily, but I personally think it’s pretty cowardly if he just ran away while his parents got killed. He could’ve called the police or tried to get some help./

(Well, he might not have even had a phone on him. Besides, in a situation like that, who knows what’d you’d act like.)

/I don’t really care what happens to some dumb model trying to be a pop idol. How can anyone even call that real music? Good thing his parents are dead so they won’t have to listen to that crap.]

"What the hell?!" You read through the expanding thread with disgust. "That’s it, I’m deleting this whole thing! Why are they even commenting on this blog if they’re gonna say crap like that?!" you typed a quick message to post on the bulletin board with a glare at your computer screen.

{That’s enough; Mi-kun is going through a horrible ordeal right now and has enough problems without his supposed fans attacking him. If I see anymore insults or rumors about his parent’s murders being spread on this blog, offending member’s will have their accounts deleted.}

You pressed the enter button with a huff. “God these people make me sick.”

Since the beginning of Misao Amane’s modeling career, you’ve run your own fan blog; ever since the arise of Mi-kun’s popularity and the murders of his parents, the site has seen increasingly negative posts.

You sighed and remembered the good old days; posting and editing Mi-kun’s newest photo books, early behind the scene interviews of his likes and dislikes (loves all sorts of sweets, hates sitting down for too long), putting up collages and pictures of his favorite things for his birthday (Valentine’s Day), and even posting your own fanart and pictures of your Mi-kun memorabilia. It used to be so much fun running the blog, but lately drama was stirring up and trolls kept popping up pretending to be fans.

Weeks went on like this with people slandering Mi-kun and you made sure to delete any trouble
“Misao, I thought you would not bother looking at those sites made by your fans, at least not for the time being.” Rem looked over Misao’s shoulder as he scrolled down his computer screen; his cheeks looked oddly flushed. “Honestly, humans seem to squabble and concern themselves with the most foolish things, even when they do not concern them.”

“But Rem, you don’t understand.” Misao whispered softly as he clicked and searched through the discussion threads on your blog. “This person is so noble…they keep defending me, telling off these jerks who keep talking about...” he trailed off with a sad frown.

“Your parent’s murders.” Rem frowned a tiny bit herself. “Please do not fret over something so trivial; what does it matter what any of those humans say?”

“It doesn’t, but this person-!” Misao’s face lit up, his eyes glistening with emotion. “They’re so kind...I wonder what they’re like in real life; from what I’ve looked up, they seem to be one of my biggest fans!” he flashed Rem a victory sign with his fingers; the shinigami remained stone faced.

“Oh Rem, you’re such a stick in the mud!” Misao pouted and went back to his computer. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“I suppose.”

“Say I found a picture of this person online.” Misao put a finger to his lips as his eyes scanned the web pages index. “Would I be able to see their name and date of death even though I’m not seeing them in person?”

“The shinigami eyes only need to see the face of the individual; whether it’s in real life or on a screen makes no difference.” Rem answered somberly; she could see where Misao was going with this. Her hunch was proven as Misao’s eyes widened and he began clicking his mouse key rapidly to get to your profile picture.

“Whoa...” he grinned as his cheeks flushed a light pink. “Look, she even has her phone number and email address up! I bet I can find her place with no problem at all!” Misao pumped his fist in the air and opened another tab to continue his search.

“Is this really the best idea?” Rem asked quietly. “You don’t know what kind of person this woman is. Perhaps you’ll be disappointed.”

Misao rolled his eyes dismissively. “We’ll see about that when I meet her.”

You stirred from your sleep as you heard a soft chiming from the front door.

“Wha-?” You stretched and checked your phone; it was pretty late. “Who the heck?”

You groggily got up and padded slowly to the front door, making sure to check the peephole before you actually opened it. You didn’t normally have guests at all, but having an unexpected visitor in the middle of the night? You suddenly felt a spike of fear go through your chest. “Please don’t let it be some psycho killer or something.”
You squinted slightly to get a better look outside; after a second you looked away and rubbed your eyes vigorously. You held your breath and looked again.

“Hello?” Misao called out timidly. “Is she not here? Oh no…”

You slowly opened the door with wide eyes. “I-I...huh?”

Misao bowed and smiled politely. “Good evening, I’m sorry to disturb you, but you don’t run Mi-kunFanBlog.com, do you?”

“Oh, yes.” You shut your slightly open mouth. “Um….oh man.”

“I really do want to apologize for coming here so late, but I had planned to come earlier and my shoot went longer than expected,” he chuckled nervously. “But I just...I really wanted to meet you.”

“You?!!?” The neighbors probably heard the outburst, but at the moment you couldn’t care less. You weren’t even sure that you weren’t still fast asleep. "You wanted to meet me?!"

“Yep.” Misao nodded. “May I come in?”

“O-of course!” You practically threw open the door as Misao made to step inside and gestured for him to take a seat. “Can I get you something to drink...?”

Your confusion was further tested by the bright pink dusting Misao’s cheeks.

“Wow….you’re just as sweet as I thought you’d be.” Misao smiled innocently. “Not to mention pretty!”

You fought the ridiculous urge to faint and clutch at your heart. “Well, Amane-san…”

“Mi-kun! Call me Mi-kun silly, there’s no need to be so formal!”

“Okay.” You blushed. “Well, Mi-kun, it’s amazing to have you here, but I don’t understand,” you cleared your throat as Misao waited expectantly for you to finish. “Why are you here?”

“I wanted to meet you.” Misao answered immediately. “I’ve been following your blog since it first started, and lately you’ve been so kind defending me…”

“It’s no big deal, I mean, it’s your fansite; even if it wasn’t, the things some of those people are saying are just awful.” You frowned slightly.

“Still, I don’t think I’ve met someone who’s a bigger fan than you; but it’s more than that, it’s like you actually care…” Misao patted the seat next to him with a small smile; you sat down next to him, positive he could actually hear your heartbeat pounding in your ears.

“The second I saw you, i knew this was meant to be.” Misao ran a hand through his hair and averted his eyes shyly. “I want-no, I need to ask you. Will you be my girlfriend?”

You just stared at him. “Are you serious?”

“Yes! You’re so kind and sweet and you seem to already know so much about me and you’re probably the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen!” Misao gushed over you like one would a puppy; he let out a soft sigh and leaned forward slightly. “Please…..let me be your boyfriend. I promise, I’ll make you happy.”

This had to be a dream; you had imagined this scenario in your mind countless times, ever since you
first saw Misao Amane’s photo on the cover of a little known magazine. You spent hours searching over every article and news feed and magazine you could to know more and more about the man you admired and now he was actually here, in your home, asking you to be with him, vowing to you as if he was your gallant knight that he would make you happy.

“It’s real though.” You thought as you found yourself nodding slowly and gasped as the man of your fantasies crushed you in his arms. As he pulled away slightly, you let your eyes drift closed as Misao cupped your cheek and leaned forward in invitation as his lips pressed against yours chastely. “It’s real and I never want this moment to end.”

Misao pulled back with a drunken smile at your dazed expression.

“I will never let this end.”
You checked your phone as you heard it beep; as you looked at your notifications, you threw it on the bed with a sigh.

**Mi-kun:** Hey darling, whatcha doing? <3

**Mi-kun:** Ugh, this photo book session is taking foreveeeer! >X3 I wish you were here! XOXO

**Mi-kun:** Okay, it’s almost over, but you can call me back anytime you want okay? I’d much rather hear you then hang out with these dumb girls. It’s like, I have a girlfriend, so can you back it up a bit? Lol, you’re way cuter than any model here anyway!

**Mi-kun:** Darling, I didn’t make you worried right? You know you’re the only one for me forever, right? <3

**Mi-kun:** I can’t wait to see you tonight; I miss you so much already!

**Mi-kun:** Hey sweetie, I tried to call you again, but I don’t think your phone’s working right. Did you get my last voice message?

**Mi-kun:** Do you want to go to that restaurant with those cute string lights? Remember, you wore that pink dress I bought you? You looked just like a princess. ;)

**Mi-kun:** Darling?

**Mi-kun:** What’s up, why aren’t you messaging me?

**Mi-kun:** I’m on my way, kisses!

“I have to tell him.” You whispered as you buried your head under thick blankets, wishing you could just turn off your phone forever. “This has gone on for way too long….I can’t take it anymore!”

In hindsight, it was all too good to be true; all the attention and pampering, all the quickly uttered words of eternal devotion and commitment, and then the constant contact. It had been piling up so fast, but you felt so blessed; Misao was incredibly kind and devoted; he had it all. Money, success, looks; and he adored you, you out of all the people in the world who idolized and loved him, and he had chosen you.

Why did you think it wouldn’t come with strings attached?

“Darling, I’m home!” Miaso threw open your bedroom door, flopping down next to you on the bed with a dramatic sigh and a laugh that charmed the masses.

It was so irritating.

“Sorry, that session went on and on, but I’m here now.” Misao yawned softly and rolled over so he could properly embrace you; you could feel the back of your neck tingle as he pressed his nose into your hair and breathed in with a euphoric sigh. “It feels so good to be home…”

“Mi-kun,” You sat up, prying his arms away, avoiding his loving gaze. “I-”

“By the way, I’m making the preparations for our special announcement!” Misao piped up abruptly.
“I have an early afternoon interview with Sakura TV; they want to hear all about my new album and my inspiration.” you closed your eyes tightly as Misao kissed the back of your neck. “The broadcast is going to be televised all throughout Japan. I’m going to let the whole country know I’m going to marry you and spend the rest of my life with the woman I love.”

“What?!” You practically shoved him away with a scowl. “Hang on, don’t I get any say in this? We’ve never even talked about marriage before, you can’t be serious!”

Misao blinked his widened eyes in shock. “B-but, don’t you want to get married?”

“No!”

He looked so lost as he stared down at his hands. “But we love each other…”

“Mi-kun, I’m tired of this.” You gripped your hair tightly. “You are constantly hovering over me, I never get any time to myself, and when I do you’re contacting me every other minute! We haven’t even been dating that long and you’re already wanting to get married? You can’t possibly know within a few months of knowing me you’d want that!”

“But I do!”

“I don’t.” You said firmly. “I don’t want to be together at all anymore; that’s what I was trying to tell you earlier…”

Misao ran a hand through his hair; you could just make out the tiniest bit of his natural color peek through the blonde. You used to love running your hands through that hair; every moment with him was a dream come true. As you watched him try to hold in his tears, you couldn’t stop yourself from feeling sorry, no matter how serious you were about breaking it off.

“I’m sorry Mi-kun…I can hardly believe I’m saying it myself…but I want to break up. I’ve always admired you and I care about you, but I’m not in love with you.” You confessed softly, gulping as you tried to contain the lump in your throat. “We…we’re not right for you. You want something I can’t give you—”

“All I want is you! I can try harder, you don’t have to love me just yet” Misao protested; he kneeled next to the edge of the bed and cupped your hands in his. “Ever since I started following your blog, I knew you were a good person, someone who stood up for me, someone I needed in my life, especially after—” he paused, his lips parted slightly as tears slowly made their way down his cheeks. You didn’t say anything; Misao rarely brought up his parent’s deaths.

“I need her. I need something, someone to hold onto.” Misao bowed his head and held your hands tighter. “Why? I did everything, I tried so hard for her…”

You took a breath and steeled yourself; this had to end.

“Misao; please leave.”

“…is that really what you want?” Misao asked gently, searching your eyes for any hint that you didn’t mean what you said, that all of this was just a joke and you would tease him for falling for such a silly prank, because how could you ever not love him?

Instead you nodded silently.

“Okay.”
Misao’s footsteps barely made a sound as he left and closed the door gingerly behind him.

“Misao,” Rem finally spoke once he had left your building. “Do not let your mind linger on that human.”

“It’s too late for that Rem.” Misao smiled, his eyes glowing in the dim lights of the street lamps; he pumped one fist in the air and winked roguishly at the perturbed shinigami. “Besides, Misao Amane doesn’t give up that easily on true love!”

Rem simply looked ahead as she speculated on what her ward was thinking and as well as the lengths humans would go to achieve their desires.
You couldn’t help your eyes stinging with new tears as you deleted your blog; you had run it for years, but now you couldn’t bear to even log in. So much time and effort went into it, but the source of your inspiration had gone sour. As you quickly wiped your eyes, you logged into a separate account for the Misao Amane fanclub.

“Well, look on the positive side.” You told yourself as you took one last look at your profile and made a mental note which users you would send your email to. “I won’t have to deal with that one asshole anymore.”

The fan page had it’s own batch of lunatics and trolls, but one user had been periodically harassing you for months. Every time they were banned, they’d end up hacking their way through the system or simply creating a new account ID. Even blocking them did little to no help, as they posted rumors and slander against you on the message boards and forums on top of it all.

“I won’t be spending countless hours online anymore, or at least I’ll be spending more time outside or getting work done.” You nodded to yourself as you reluctantly went to your settings. But none of these points could distract from the reality of why you were removing yourself from the Misao Amane fandom. If other fans knew the truth, they’d probably join in on the tormenting out of bitterness and jealousy.

A knock at your door made you start slightly; you felt your chest clench in apprehension as you looked through the peephole once again. With a sigh of resignation, you cracked open the door.

“Hey.” Misao smiled timidly, but his pupils seemed to dilate at the sight of you. “I’m sorry to show up like this, but I was hoping we could talk. It’s important.”

You lingered at the doorway before motioning for him to step inside. “Did something happen?”

“No, it’s nothing for you to worry about.” Misao chuckled; he took off his carrier bag and placed it on the couch. “How have things been? I’ve been looking at your blog and the fansite attachments...has that person still been bothering you?”

“Not for a while.” You sat down on the other end of the couch stiffly. “I was just about to delete my account actually....”

“I came at just the right time then.” Misao grinned as he pulled out a notebook and a pen; on the cap was a skull with a similar smile. “I want to show you something.”

One Week Earlier:

“You must think about this carefully.” Rem pleaded in her solemn voice, but Misao only ignored her, keeping his eyes glued to the screen, muttering under his breath.

“I have their address...it shouldn’t be difficult to get their name and face...”

“Misao, listen to me.” Rem said. “I gave you the Death Note so you may use it for yourself, not to settle some petty squabble for somebody who has rejected you. Surely you can think of some other purpose for it?”
“This is what I want to use it for.” Misao replied evenly; after a moment, his typing stopped and he gasped suddenly. “Found them! Ugh, they’re pretty ugly; just what I’d expect from a monster harassing my darling! She’s gonna be so excited that I took care of this for her!” Misao hugged himself and laughed carelessly.

“Do you really suppose the way to gain her favor is through this?” Rem asked gravely.

Misao’s smile only grew more radiant. “I’ll do anything for her. Once she sees how much I’m willing to devote myself for her, she’ll have to see I’m the only one for her! What other guy would be willing to go this far for the sake of his beloved? You’ll see Rem, it’ll all work out.”

Misao pondered the ways she could kill them. “I need to prove to her I can use this power...I’ll set the conditions, I gotta be specific so there’s no doubt in her mind I can use it. I wonder if I should show you to her? I bet she’d think it’s so cool, she’ll flip. Though maybe I should wait for that….it might be a bit much, hehe!”

Rem could only look on as Misao clutched his pen tightly to his heart with a blissful smile.

Present:

“This isn’t funny.”

“But it’s not a joke!” Misao insisted.

You shook your head in disgust, assuming it was all lies. “Do you seriously think I’m stupid enough to believe you can write a person’s name on a piece of paper to kill them?”

Misao shook his head adamantly. “But this isn’t just any notebook! Look, I wrote down their real name and the time of their death. I can even make them die in a certain way!” he read aloud from the page. “I wrote, ‘Cause of death: suicide after posting a quick message at exactly 1:50pm on all the websites where they bullied others online, saying goodbye and apologizing for their ways. Time of death: 2:00pm.’ By now, they should be dead.”

You didn’t know whether to laugh or kick Misao out. “Come on, you can’t-”

“Check your site.”

It didn’t take more than a second to scroll down to the public message board; you shoved down the slight feeling of apprehension that almost made you hesitate reading the most recent post. There was something in his eyes, a dead seriousness, as if he knew with the utmost clarity what would happen and when it would mean.

“It’s not real. Even if it was, Misao would never-”

“You see?! It’s right there!” Misao clapped his hand together and laughed happily as he read the post over your shoulder; he was right. It was the same user, but a very unusual message. They planned to hang themselves.

“Alright, that settles it.” Misao nodded. “They’re dead!”

The notebook laid down on your table seemed so much more ominous; you couldn’t tear your gaze away from it. The skull on the pen’s cap grinned up at you knowingly.

“Misao…” You stood up suddenly, nearly knocking over your computer and the whole table. “H-how did you even get that thing?! How could you just-just-!”
“They were hurting you.” Misao grabbed your arms and made you sit back down; your knees were knocking together, but you managed to yank your arms from his grasp. He looked as if you slapped him.

“Don’t be scared, there’s absolutely no way this will be traced back to me. Besides, I was only trying to show you how useful I can be to you.” Misao said kindly. “You’ll never have to worry about anyone hurting you, I can protect you!”

You cringed as he kneeled down in front of you and rested his head on your knees. “I can be your knight in shining armor, I’ll kill anyone who stands in the way of your happiness.”

The conviction of these words shook you nearly as much as how easily they were uttered, like it meant absolutely nothing.

“Your parents were killed by a murderer!” You said shrilly, slamming your fists down on your thighs. “How could you do that to somebody, take someone’s life and feel nothing about it!? Don’t you have a fucking conscience, a soul!!?”

“You don’t understand!” Misao bit his lips as tears rolled down his cheeks. “I don’t have anything, anyone else left to lose anymore! You don’t understand….”

A stab of pity went through you; regardless, it was evident Misao felt no guilt for taking someone’s life. His feelings of remorse, sorrow, and pain were solely due to his feelings for you.

You trembled and despite your feelings of disgust, you found yourself weeping at the scene. “How could he be so messed up? This has got to be a sick joke.”

Misao bent his forehead and sobbed. “They’re gone…and Kira killed their murderer.”

“Are you saying you’re Kira!!”

“No, I’m not! I don’t know how Kira got his notebook, but I was given mine by a shinigami. I’ve only used it a few times to kill criminals, and I was going to try to reach out to Kira, but…”

Your voice was barely audible. “B-but what?”

“I met you!” Misao gave you a weak smile. “I wanted to thank Kira for what he did, but I realized if I did that then there would be a chance the police would be out to find me. I just can’t do anything to put our relationship in jeopardy. If you want, I’ll even stop using the Death Note to kill criminals, I’ll only use it to protect you from now on, okay?” Misao hugged your waist and pressed his face into your stomach; you were frozen in your seat, growing more and more numb by the second. “Don’t you see why I’m the perfect man for you? I’ll do anything, be anything; your boyfriend, your tool, your weapon. As long as I can be with you, I don’t care what happens.”

You felt your heart sink to your stomach. “And if I refuse? Are you going to kill me?”

“What?! Of course not, I’d never kill you!” Misao looked up at you with a genuinely hurt expression. “How can you even think that? I could never…”

You didn’t feel very reassured; after all, it was obvious Misao was mentally unstable. What was really to stop him from killing you under some circumstance? Misao was easily jealous...he might lash out at you...no, most likely he’d kill the person he thought was stealing you away. He may even threaten to kill your friends or family if you didn’t do what he wanted.

“I’m trapped. I can’t do anything…” You bowed your head, sobs making your shoulders jerk
erratically as you pressed your fists against your eyes, like a vain attempt to block out the reality of what was happening. You could’ve laughed at the way things were going; no one would believe you if you went to the police. A notebook that kills people? Who in the world would believe it, let alone believe this innocent young man could do such a thing.

“Heh...and he’s so beautiful too.” You wanted to laugh at the irony of it all; of course someone who looked so angelic would be so twisted. You never could go by looks nowadays...

“Sweetie, don’t cry!” Misao began rocking you back and forth in his arms, kissing your forehead and cheeks tenderly. “Shh, don’t cry...everything’s going to be okay now. I love you and I’ll do everything I can to make you love me.” he paused as he felt you trying to free your arms.

“What is she...?” Misao thought anxiously as you pulled back just a bit; one of your arms gripped at the front of his shirt for a few seconds. He smiled giddily as you kept it there and leaned into him limply.

“Okay…”

“Okay?” Misao asked softly; you just nodded, eyes dull and unseeing.

“Yay! You won’t regret this, we’re gonna be so happy!” he giggled and blew a raspberry against your neck and gave you a playful wink. “Anything for my number one fan!”
Genos

“Miss, it clearly states on this flier that the sale is today.”

You blinked as the paper was thrust into your face, as if you weren’t able to read it from behind the counter. “Yes sir, but the sale ends at 4:00pm; it’s 4:05pm now.”

“Honestly, these professional heroes think they should get special treatment or something.” You thought a bit bitterly as Genos continued to frown stubbornly; his friend on the other hand shrugged. You squinted; that blank face looked oddly familiar.

“But it’s only a few minutes after and the red tags are still placed on all the meat packages.” Genos persisted. “Surely-”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t sell you that half price with the sale time over. Those are just the rules.” You told him politely, wondering if your irritation showed at all on your face. It was bad enough having to deal with the usual troublesome customers, but entitled ones?

“Geez, does he think ‘cause he’s an S-class hero we’ll all just bend the rules for him? I mean, do cyborgs even need to eat...?”

“Don’t sweat it Genos, let’s just get the chicken, it’s still pretty cheap.”

“But master-”

“Can you stop with the master already? People are staring...” his friend looked around; indeed the people behind them in line began to stare, mildly curious and annoyed at the hold up.

“Hold on.”

They both looked at you suddenly.

You gasped. “Holy crap, you're Captain Baldy!”

Saitama sighed. ‘Why did it have to be that name?”

Genos on the other hand was cracking a somewhat proud smile. “Master this is good, you’re getting the recognition you deserve.”

“I was there when you beat the Sea King.” You said in awe. “Wow, I can’t believe it’s really you! You saved us-”

“Hey, that guy’s no hero!” a man standing a few places down the line scowled. “He just took credit for what the other heroes already did!”

“Yeah, he’s a cheat.” a young woman not so discreetly whispered to her friend. “He’s just a liar!”

“Genos, maybe we should go now.” Despite his statement, Saitama looked incredibly unconcerned by the hostile group; Genos on the other hand was visibly upset, though he obediently followed his mentor outside.

“Master, don’t listen to those people.” he said the second they were out the door; he knew Saitama didn’t want the public knowing the truth, but it was so unfair still. “If they knew-”

“Don’t worry about it. I think the udon shop is having a 25% off sale, how ‘bout we eat there tonight?” Saitama suggested absently. “I’m kinda more in the mood for noodles anyway.”
“Wait!”

They turned around and watched you dash out to them with a few full plastic bags swinging from your arms. When you caught up to them, you held out the groceries with a small smile.

“She. It’s on me.”

“Huh?” Saitama took the bags with a questioning frown. “For us?”

“I’ve seen you in action before you became officially registered.” You said. “I know what kind of power you have; to be honest, it was pretty obvious you were lying at that battle. You really are a hero for what you said.” you bowed your head respectfully. “On top of that, you saved my life. I’m grateful, so please, take this as a thank you.”

“Uh, wow, thanks a lot!” Saitama smiled; he and Genos peered inside the heaviest bag. Including their original purchases, there was also two packages of the beef they wanted.

“But won’t you get in trouble with your supervisor?” Genos asked.

You shrugged. “Don’t worry about it, just enjoy, okay?”

“That was nice.” Saitama commented as Genos diligently cut up the beef for their curry once they were settled in the apartment. “This will probably last us a couple of days too.”

Genos was silent as he stirred and tested the curry sauce and turned off the rice cooker; he ate without really looking at what he was eating, but Saitama didn’t think much of it. After all, Genos didn’t even need to eat.

“Hey, you can taste that right?”

No answer.

“Hey, your battery low or something?”

“Ah, forgive me, I was just lost in thought.” Genos inclined his head in apology.

Saitama shrugged and cleared away his dishes. “Well, I’m gonna go to sleep. Night.”

“Goodnight.”

Genos didn’t actually need sleep of course; he didn’t need food or water or even medicine. As a man who was almost completely made of technology and wires, he didn’t need the same things someone who was completely human would need.

But that night, he felt something pulling at him, like an itch; he turned restlessly on his futon and stared up at the ceiling.

The next day, Saitama went to the fridge to get some milk for his cereal.

“Darn, we’re out.”

Genos immediately rose from his futon. “I will get it master.”

Before Saitama could say anything else, he had rushed out the door and down the stairs.

“...okay....”
“It’s a bit early...I wonder if she will be working at this hour?” Genos walked through the store’s front door, the little bell jingling to signal a customer’s arrival. He felt something whirring inside him as you greeted him. For some reason the absence of other customers left him feeling uncomfortable.

“Good morn-oh, it’s you.” You gave him a tiny smile.

“Yes. I need to purchase some milk.”

He stood in front of the counter rigidly; you waited for something else to happen.

“.....”

“........”

“....do you need me to tell you where it is?”

“What?” Genos blinked. “N-no, I can find it.”

He abruptly turned around and made his way to the frozen foods section of the store; he realized his mistake and doubled back to the dairy aisle.

“How odd...it seems my navigation system is acting up.” Genos noted as he found the bottles of milk; he had just been there and yet he briefly couldn’t remember where it was.

“Glad to see you found your way to the counter.” You grinned wryly as Genos placed the milk a bit harder than he meant to down in front of you.

“Yes.” Genos answered unnecessarily; the transaction was awkward as the money exchanged hands and Genos started as the tip of your index finger brushed against his hand.

“Are you okay?” You asked; he seemed on edge.

Genos looked at the change in his clenched fist. “You recognized my master. Do you know who I am?”

“Oh sure, you’re the cyborg hero. I don’t think there’s anyone in this city that wouldn’t know who you were.”

He looked as if what he wanted to say next was stuck in his throat.

“Do cyborgs get nervous?” You wondered; of course, only a portion of him was a machine, so you supposed he probably still felt typical human emotions, right?

“You are a fan of my master?”

“I guess so.” You nodded bashfully.

Genos stopped talking again.

You couldn’t help giggling slightly; he looked a bit disappointed. “You know, after properly meeting you, I think it’s safe to say I’m a fan of yours too.”

“Really?” Genos’ gaze flickered. “I appreciate that; I am not as great as my mentor, but I aspire to become worthy of the title of hero as he is.”

“That’s an admirable thing to do.” You smiled warmly; you had to admit, he wasn’t really the person
you thought he was initially. You were a bit startled as Genos bowed lowly at the waist.

“Thank you very much!”

“Sure.” You stared at him, bewildered as he raced out the door. “He needs to unwind a bit or something…”

The Next Day:

“Shoot, we need more toilet paper.”

“Allow me master!” Genos sped out the apartment.

The Next Day:

“Huh, did we run out of bread-?”

“I will get it!”

The Next Day:

“Oh, we’re almost out of-”

“I will be right back!”

Saitama blinked as Genos barreled out the room. “He sure does like to shop.”

This continued nearly every day for a few months; Genos would find an excuse to visit the grocery store at some point every day. Saitama didn’t mind; Genos was using his own money after all, plus it seemed to keep him from pestering him all day about that disciple business. It was too bad really. Perhaps if he did know, he would’ve been able to help before it all got out of hand.

“Good evening.” Genos couldn’t help smiling at your own familiar grin.

“Hey, you’re just in time, we’re gonna close in a few minutes.” You said casually; you were getting ready to lock up for the night before Genos came through the door.

Genos swiftly picked out a bag of green onions. “I apologize for any inconvenience.”

“Don’t be silly, it’s always nice to see you.”

Something was making Genos come back as often as he could; something was making him feel more human than he had ever felt, something was making the quite literal gears and cogs in his body whir to life and the wires and plugs thrum with electricity every time you smiled in his general direction.

He wished he could just say how glad it made him feel for you to say such a thing; instead he left the store with the small bag clutched in his hand and make his way down the street with an almost dejected expression.

A piercing scream made him stop in his tracks.

“Help me!”

“Shut up!”
Genos left burning skid marks in the pavement as he went back; he looked around wildly and saw you cornered against the building, a knife held to your face.

“I said shut the hell up!” the mugger ordered lowly; he was hoping not to make a scene, hoping you’d be too scared and intimidated to make a sound. “Just hand over your purse and-AAHHH!”

You sank farther against the wall as the man’s skull was crushed into the brick, just a few inches from your own head. Genos’ hand was shooting sparks, and you could see one side of the stranger's face was burned down to the bone.

“Are you okay?”

Your lips struggled to move properly as Genos lifted the man and tossed him to the sidewalk like it was nothing; his eyes glowed almost like a predator's in the near darkness.

“Is he…?” You stared at the limp body of your attacker.

“Yes, he probably is. It does not matter.” Genos answered bluntly; he moved closer to you. “Are you hurt?” he repeated more gently.

You couldn’t stop staring at the body; the man’s eyes were wide open, looking up at the sky but not seeing it. You felt your stomach lurch at the smell of burning flesh; a fly had landed on his pupil, near his charred flesh. “Oh my god.”

“He was threatening you with an illegal weapon.” Genos examined the knife. “I may have went a bit too far, but what does that really matter?”

“What does it matter?!” You asked in disbelief. “You’re supposed to be a hero! You didn’t have to use that much force-!”

“Won’t you thank me?” Genos replied quietly. “I saved you...I thought you’d be happy. Was I wrong to assume this?”

“Genos, why…?”

He spoke carefully. “Because I feel strongly for you. I do not particularly care what methods I have to use to express that.”

You were pressed firmly into the side of the building at this point; Genos had you cornered, his eyes flooring you to the spot; you shivered as the cold metal of his hand cupped your cheek.

“I will keep you safe.”
It was a village that time almost seemed to forget; true, the majority of houses had some more modern appliances and there were even phones and small places of business, yet Sonic’s hometown at first glance could be easily mistaken as something from the feudal era. He passed by his old school of training and began to feel even more oddly wistful as he walked on; so many memories were here, but he couldn’t let himself forget his purpose for visiting.

“Is this really the right time? Have I really gotten stronger? I still can’t be that bald bastard, but I don’t want to wait any longer.” Sonic sulked and sighed heavily. He was getting closer to his destination, but as confident as he felt coming home, he was beginning to feel less sure with every passing second. And it had been such a long time ago, he couldn’t help wonder if you even remembered him.

Would you even remember the promise you had made, to wait for his return after he had become stronger?

Sonic sucked in a breath; he had come to your home and eyed the strong to ring the doorbell, He grabbed it and pulled; the bell crashed to the ground, the sound surely loud enough to be heard miles away.

“Shit.”

“Hello?” You nearly threw open your door and gasped when you saw Sonic. “Oh-Sonic!”

“Hey.” he gave you a lazy wave. “Can I come in?”

“Oh, yes, of course!” You slide open the door wider and Sonic slipped off his shoes before going further.

“Wow...this place looks exactly the same.” Sonic commented; you knelt at the kotatsu and Sonic joined you. The overall interior could only be described as homey.

“Yeah, not much changes around here.” You laughed and balled up your hands in your lap. “Sonic, I’m really surprised. I had no idea you’d be back in town.”

“I thought it was about time I came home and fulfilled my promise.”

Your welcoming smile fell. “Oh. I suppose you mean-”

“Is something the matter?” Sonic asked you suddenly; his eyes seemed to look right through you despite his questioning look.

“Sonic...is it true what people have said you’ve been up to since you left?”

“I’ve been mostly training.”

“I mean, about…your jobs.” Your gaze went back and forth between the side of his face and his shoulder; you couldn’t seem to bring yourself to look at him straight. “I heard you’ve made quite a name for yourself...I heard you’ve become a hired gun.”

Sonic involuntarily glared. “Who’s been telling you that?”

“Everyone in town talks about it; we hear rumors from tourists and the news after all. We haven’t
been completely cut off from the world you know.” You gave him a halfhearted smile that disappeared at his somber expression. “Is it true? Have you been using your skills to kill people for money?”

“It’s not really about the money. I try to find stronger opponents; half of the time I won’t even take the jobs unless I think they’ll be a challenge.” Sonic told you proudly to disguise his discomfort; he should’ve known you would hear about his notorious reputation at some point. Even a somewhat isolated place like this was bound to hear things, to say nothing of how fast gossip traveled.

“I always knew you enjoyed fighting.” You said with a clipped chuckle. “Even when you first started training, it seemed you could never be happy unless you were battling someone strong. It was all you ever thought about.”

“That isn’t all I’ve thought about these past years.”

You peered up at him with a wary look. “Sonic, why have you come back?”

His brow furrowed. “To make good on my promise. I know I’ve been gone a while-”

“Years.” You corrected as you averted your eyes. “A lot has changed since then. You’ve changed…”

“Not really. I’ve just taken opportunities to further enhance my skills and make a living for myself.” Sonic replied; despite his thin frown, his eyes softened at your pained look. “You’ve changed too. You’ve grown up….you’re beautiful.”

“I think you should leave.”

Sonic felt his legs twitch under the heated table; he had the strangest impulse to run away. “Was I interrupting something?”

“My fiance will be home soon. It would look strange if you were here while he is gone.”

“I see. I suppose I should be going then. Goodbye.”

Sonic was gone the moment you blinked; you sat there for some time staring at the spot he occupied until your fiance came home.

“Did something happen?” he sat down next to you when you greeted him with a weak smile. “Why are you sitting here all alone?”

“I’ve just been reminiscing. I feel like so much time has gone by, but it feels like my life had barely began too. Is that weird?”

“A bit, but I understand.” he kissed your cheek and yawned. “I’m surprised you’re even still up. Let’s go to sleep.”

“Okay…”

It would’ve been so nice to forget everything that had transpire in the last three hours; you truly were exhausted, but you also couldn’t bring yourself to sleep. Your fiance was laying on his side and passed out; you watched his shoulder move up and down slowly as he breathed in and out. A weary smile crossed your face; your life had led you down a path where you were able to meet a man who truly loved you. With that peaceful thought in mind you were just drifting off to sleep when a crash came from outside the bedroom; your fiance bolted up and you stared at him worriedly as he silently crept out of bed.
“Sh, I’m sure it’s just another animal stuck in the compost. Just go back to sleep.” he laughed briefly and tiptoed down the hall. You watched as he disappeared around the corner, knots twisting in your stomach as you heard something heavy fall to the ground.

You kept as quiet as possible as you slipped out of the bed and tried to avoid making the floor creak as you made your way into the living room; around the corner a light was on.

“Did he catch it?” You wondered; your fiance must’ve turned on the lamp to see better. Maybe he dropped something or hit against something to make it fall and it startled the animal away. You poked your head around the corner and screamed.

Your fiance was in the middle of the living room floor, a clean cut across his neck; the blood seeped out of the wound and stained the wooden floor. He was still gasping as Sonic placed his foot over his neck and stomped.

“Shut up.”

“STOP!” You rushed forward, not caring Sonic’s blade was still out and that he could kill you with one strike; for whatever reason he made no move to escape your blows as you pushed him away with balled up fists. “You bastard, you-!”

Sonic only moved to the side slightly, but as you missed you fell forward to the ground on your knees; they stung from the impact and you let a moan escape you. Your fiance’s paling face was turned toward you.

“Are you afraid of me? Do I disgust you?” Sonic asked lowly as he crouched in front of you, mask covering half his face. “Was he worth breaking our promise? Or did you get tired of waiting for me? Or-”

“I hate you…” You fell limp on the floor, forehead touching the cold wood surface as you gasped for breath. “You’re just a murderer. I...would never...marry someone like you.”

“So you chose a weakling instead. You betrayed me.” Sonic would have laughed but it was too funny. “I did it for you. I worked so hard to become stronger and you go back on your word for a nobody. Heh, how’d that turn out? Look at him now,” Sonic yanked your head up by your hair. “LOOK AT HIM NOW.”

You thrashed about and tried to make him release you, but it only made him grip tighter.

“I waited so long just to return…” Sonic whispered. “Was it because I was gone for so long? Were you lonely? Did you figure I would never come back?”

He knelt down and pulled you halfway into his lap. “But I’m here now...we can pick up where we left off and be happy. I need to go back to the city soon, but this time I’ll make sure to come back and visit often. When you’re ready, we’ll be married.”

Sonic raised you up higher and kissed your forehead; he slowly lowered you down and before you could say anything he slung the body of your fiance over his shoulder. The dead weight didn’t seem to be heavy at all, but you knew the truth.

You knew Sonic was strong and you knew he had the skills to do one of two things: kill you as fast as he had killed your love or track you down to the ends of the earth.

“I won’t make you wait too long this time. I’ll be back faster than the speed of sound.” Sonic laughed and gave you a feral grin. “Be a good girl and be patient this time, okay?”
“Come on, one more time!” Rin clapped her hands excitedly; you grinned down at her sheepishly and scratched the back of your head.

Jaken rolled his eyes as he followed behind Sesshomaru. “Honestly, humans are so easily amused.”

“Pleeease?” Rin ignored him and clung to the hem of your shirt with an eager smile. “Just one more time!”

“Ah, I don’t know. Are you sure it doesn’t scare you?” You asked her uncertainly; you had never met a human child so unabashedly unafraid of a yokai, but it wasn’t the oddest thing that you had seen lately.

“I’m not scared! And don’t listen to grumpy Master Jaken, he just doesn’t like to have fun.” Rin crossed her arm and pouted as Jaken sent her a stern look.

“We are not here to ‘have fun’. We are here to assist Lord Sesshoumaru, not bother with foolish games.” Jaken glanced up at Sesshoumaru as if to validate his statement, but his lord only kept walking forward silently.

“What a shrimp like you could do to assist a full blooded yokai is beyond me.” You laughed boldly as Jaken squawked indignantly and flailed his stick, yet this only made you laugh harder. “Hey, shouldn’t you be addressing me as Lady? I’m a yokai too you know, maybe even more powerful than your Lord.”

“Hm, it seems you forget who is the one who had to save your skin earlier.”

You frowned at Sesshoumaru’s cutting jab. “Hey, I never asked for your help you know!”

Truth be told, as powerful as you were, you simply didn’t possess the skills of other more formidable yokai. Training and swords and fighting didn’t interest you in the least; in your humble opinion it was all a useless bore, but that didn’t help you feel less ashamed of having to rely on someone else to get you out of a tight spot.

Sesshoumaru didn’t turn around as he strolled confidently forward. “Oh really? Then I suppose those yokai wouldn’t have torn you limb from limb for theft?” he scoffed. “You’re an embarrassment.”

You growled in frustration and the trees branches began to tremble. “Don’t talk down to me!”

“Don’t you talk that way to Lord Sesshoumaru, you ungrateful feline wench!” Jaken prodded your leg with his staff; one glance down at him was enough to make him stop, yet his eyes still held fearful contempt.

“Please don’t fight. Aren’t you happy Lord Sesshoumaru helped you?” Rin tugged lightly at your clothes to get your attention. “Don’t be mad at him.”

“I really couldn’t care less.”

“Lord Sesshoumaru….” Rin said softly as your eyes narrowed and the marks on your cheeks deepened like old scars.

Sesshoumaru stopped. “And refrain from using your grating roar, if you could really call it that. We
need to be stealthy and I’d rather not be bothered defeating every insignificant creature that threaten us.”

“You don’t need to, I can take care of myself just fine.” You retorted; if there was one thing you couldn’t stand was how Sesshoumaru, also a full blooded yokai, acted as if you were somehow beneath him.

“Haha, talk about fighting like cats and dogs, right?” Rin smiled widely trying to defuse the tense atmosphere.

“I’m a tiger.” You muttered bitterly. “You fleabag yokai always think you’re so much better than everyone else. Makes me sick to my stomach!”

“If you are going to vomit a hairball, please turn the other way.”

“That was pretty funny Lord Sesshoumaru.” Rin giggled as she gave you an apologetic look; you couldn’t help sulk.

“Hey, I thought I was the cool one?”

“You’re okay, but Lord Sesshoumaru is the coolest!”

“Ugh, humans have no taste.” You stuck up your nose in an attempt to seem aloof; the four of you walked on for several hours until the moon had almost completely risen and taken the sun’s place. In all this time, you still stewed with resentment.

“He’s thinks he’s so great...so what if he’s strong, he’s still a antisocial ass.” You thought to yourself as you helped Rin gather firewood; thanks to your elevated body heat, you weren’t affected in the least by the lowering temperature, but you knew very well how fragile a human’s body was, and the thought of Rin freezing and getting ill made you inexplicably sad.

“Hm, to think he’d travel with with a weak human...I wonder if he’s kinder than he let’s on...” You snarled and shook your head feverently. “No. Just because I owe him one, doesn’t mean he’s anything more than a pompous, arrogant, stone faced-”

“Hey, get moving, we can’t keep Lord Sesshoumaru waiting!” Jaken had thrown a stick at the back of your head. You turned around and Jaken fell on his backside as your eyes glowed eerily in the darkness.

“Don’t order me around!”

Rin pouted sadly. “Please don’t fight. We have enough wood, let’s go back.”

“Alright, alright.” You huffed and blinked your eyes; with a half smile, you took Rin’s bundle. “A child like you might drop all this stuff, so leave it to me okay?”

“You know, you and Lord Sesshoumaru are more alike than you think.”

“Huh? Is this a joke?”

“No, I mean it!” Rin insisted as she trailed after you. “Lord Sesshoumaru’s nice, but he just has a hard time showing it; he can be scary, but he’s so strong and brave, I never feel afraid with him around! You’re nice too, even if you act tough and mean.”

You felt yourself smiling wryly. “Honestly, that’s all I hear these days. ‘Lord Sesshoumaru this and
Lord Sesshoumaru that. ’ He’s not special or anything, just a yokai like any other.”

“Insolence!” Jaken piped up angrily. “How dare you compare Lord Sesshoumaru with a lout such as yourself!”?

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” You kicked Jaken and sent him sprawling toward the dimming fire; Sesshoumaru didn’t spare you or Rin a glance as the two of you set down the dry wood.

“I hope you don’t expect me to sing your praises like these two.” You commented at you threw some wood into the brightly burning flames.

“No, I do not. Besides, I wouldn’t expect you to be eloquent enough to string together too many sentences.” Sesshoumaru answered dully as he watched Rin happily become entranced with the rising embers.

“Hey, look at me if you’re gonna insult me you mongrel!”

Sesshoumaru turned his whole head to look at you dismissively. “Childish too. It’s no wonder you can’t protect yourself. You’re weak.”

You snatched a piece of wood and threw it, barely missing his face by a centimeter. “Did I ask for your help?! You just wanted that amulet I stole right? I never asked for you to save me and the only reason I’m even here is to repay my debt!”

You ignored the worried stares of both Rin and Jaken; Sesshoumaru’s aura was suddenly icy cold as his eyes bored holes into you, like you weren’t even there. It was infuriating.

“That is correct. Saving you was merely a coincidence.” Sesshoumaru said calmly. “You have a funny way of showing your gratitude.”

“Well if you weren’t insulting me every other day or acting like I’m below your notice, then maybe I wouldn’t feel like **smashing your skull in!**” Your roar shook the earth, and your fangs became more pronounced; the tips scrapped against your lips lightly as you argued. “If I didn’t owe you my life, I’d be outta here!”

“I didn’t intend to come to your aid.” Sesshoumaru told you, his glare becoming more narrowed and sharp; the fire’s light made the golden irises glow unnaturally and even you couldn’t help a spike of intimidation cut through your nerves. “You owe me nothing, so why are you still here?”

You dropped the wood in your hand and felt your claws retract. “Fine then.”

“Wait, it’s dangerous to be out here alone!” Rin called after you, but you were far gone before she even opened her mouth; she turned to Sesshoumaru with wide eyes. “Lord Sesshoumaru, what if she gets hurt? Aren’t there bad things here at night? They probably woke up from her yelling…”

Jaken snorted and laid back against a tree trunk. “Do you really expect Lord Sesshoumaru to give that wench a moment’s thought? She came and left of her own free will.”

You tore through the forest on four legs, ear perked up to listen more carefully; you were cursing yourself under your breath for your lack of restraint. Every enemy could have heard you from miles away and you had no idea where you even were or how to get out of the forest.

“I just can’t stand him!” You growled under your breath; suddenly, you found yourself being thrown against a large tree. You slid to the ground mostly unharmed except a scratch here and there on your back. “The hell was that?!”
“A tigress all the way out here? What are the odds?!”

Your groaned in frustration; it was a boar demon, tusks stained with dried blood and eyes glowing red.

“Oh, I take it you haven’t dealt with the likes of me before? Too bad….for you.”

The misshapen boar began pacing back and forth in front of you, smoke coming from it’s nostrils like a furnace; you knew one thing about boar demons. The minute you were inside their stomachs your flesh burned and melted instantly; due to their hard pelts and skins, even yokai were unable to cut themselves out of the beasts’ bellies.

“You’ve got great timing, I haven’t eaten in awhile. No one is foolish enough to wander around here much anymore, but I guess you are!” The boar chuckled as he charged; you were paralyzed in fear, unable to even move out of the way.

“He was right…” You thought desolately. “I am weak…”

The boar opened his mouth wide as if his jaw was disconnected; you could already smell death.

“I’m going to die…I’m going to-"

“NO!”

The boar slammed it’s tusks into the tree, and found them stuck; with no effort he dug them out and sent the whole tree crashing to the ground as you began to sprint.

You roared as you ran fleetly around the trees and brush, claws digging into the ground as you panted and huffed from the effort. It was true, you weren’t a fighter, you weren’t ruthless, but you weren’t going to just do nothing. You would fight tooth and nail, even if it seemed hopeless.

“I don’t even know how to get out of here though…” You looked around wildly for any sign of the boar; you were fast, but the boar demons were notorious for catching up to even the fastest of yokai.

“So you decided to come back.” Sesshoumaru was running beside you; you flinched and scowled.

“This isn’t a good time.”

“Clearly.” Sesshoumaru grabbed your arm and led you in another direction; he was stronger than you thought, you couldn’t even pry one finger off. “Stay low.”

You were forced to crouch behind a large bush; the branches were heavy with deep plum colored berries. “You think hiding behind this bush will help us?”

“You are the one who will be hiding. These berries are poisonous to demons.”

“Come on, even you can’t defeat that thing!” You whispered angrily as Sesshoumaru began to walk out in the clearing, calm and cool as always. Despite your fear, you couldn’t help feel a bit irritated. It wasn’t like he was invulnerable, not anymore than even the strongest of yokai. At the same time, you couldn’t help being in awe; he had guts for an aristocrat.

“Stay here.”

“Why the hell are you doing this, I didn’t ask for you to-!”

“Shut up, he’s coming.”
Sesshoumaru stood proudly, sword held in his hand and completely relaxed; the boar wasted no time as he charged out from the brush, eyes glowing even brighter from the promise of a good meal; drool hung from each tusk as he snorted.

“You made me lose my prey yokai!”

“Yours? How presumptuous.”

You raised your head a few inches from above the bush; Sesshoumaru ran at the boar at full speed, wielding the heavy sword with ease.

“Die.”

The boar’s pelt was peeled off as easily as if Sesshoumaru had been peeling a grapes skin; the demon’s intestines spilled out, steaming and oozing from the wound in his gut. You peered closely and saw the remains of bones and even some debris fall out as Sesshoumaru landed on the ground gracefully.

“What a waste of time. Don’t make a habit of running off like a petulant child.” Sesshoumaru addressed you sternly; you closed your gaped mouth and sneered.

“You-you-! Argh!” You lunged, all traces of fear wiped from your mind at his cold expression.

“Why? Why the hell did you even come here!?”

“Simply put, for you.”

Sesshoumaru side stepped you, setting you off balance and falling to the ground with a gasp; you yelped in pain as his nails scratched your arm. He was holding you up with what could almost be a smirk if it wasn’t so miniscule.

“So you saved me to show me up?” You spat. “Fine then, you’re stronger, happy? Now let me go so we can be out of each other’s hair.”

“I rather like your hair.”

You grit your teeth as his hand tightened around your arm and pulled you into him; his touch was burning and did nothing to make your shallow cuts sting less.

“I rather like you, despite your bluster and uncouth behavior. In fact,,” Sesshoumaru added without much thought. “It’s quite...endearing.”

“What do you want?” You asked lowly.

“You said you owed me one right? Who told you you could pay off your debt to me by running away?” Sesshoumaru cupped your cheek, his claws trailing dangerously close to your eyes. “You’ve seen only a small portion of my strength. Even someone as bullheaded as you should understand what will happen if you displease me.”

You tried to wriggle out of his hold but he wasn’t having it; you felt your face being pressed further into his tail and his arms wrap around you. The embrace was far from warm or comforting; you felt as if he was going to crush your spine or at the very least you were aware he could if he felt like it.

“Are you purring?” he chuckled briefly and then stared off into the night sky. “That day...I can’t fathom why, but I saved you. And then you made the mistake of joining me on my journey; I decided to let you run off to calm yourself, and then you get in trouble? It’s all the more reason why I need to keep a closer watch over you.”
“Sesshoumaru-!” You tried to get a word in, but he cut you off with a tight squeeze.

“Rin is concerned, so we must head back now. Don’t stray too far from my sight again….you’ve seen what happens to those who slight me.” Sesshoumaru glanced meaningfully at the carcass of the boar.

You let out a sigh of relief as he released you, though he looked back at you expectantly for a moment before walking away; you followed a step behind him.

“Good, you learn quickly.” Sesshoumaru ran one hand lazily through your hair. “Let’s see that you repay your life debt accordingly.”
You tripped over your own feet, landing in a heap at the entrance to your mistresses home; she stepped out on the threshold and glared down as you scrambled to pick yourself up.

“You clumsy, oafish girl...maybe I should send you to work at the brothel instead.”

“No, forgive me mistress!” You bowed until your forehead was touching the ground. “I apologize for my foolishness, I could never hope to be as graceful as you.”

“Hm. That is true. I daresay I overestimated your competence.” she sighed and turned her back to you. “Fetch the water from the spring and then find more berries for my paints. Do it quickly and I’ll forgive your transgression.”

“Yes, right away mistress.” You bowed once more and only rose from your position once you were sure she had went back inside. The second the door was closed, you stood and picked up the bucket and the smaller basket sitting next to the steps.

“I almost wished I would’ve taken the lashing.” You thought to yourself as you approached the large trees that seemed to loom over you the closer you were; the sun was already setting, and if you were more diligent, you would’ve done this chore much earlier in the day.

“It’s not my fault, she insisted I serve her, the…” Even in your own mind you were afraid to insult your mistress, for fear she could somehow see on your face your true thoughts. It wasn’t as if you were in any worse of a position than most women without a penny to their name or a relative to turn to; most people would scold you for any complaints and tell you to count your blessings that you avoided selling your body to pay for your meals.

You could faintly hear the sound of running water the farther you walked; if you were fast enough, you could make it back just before nightfall.

“Is this really better though?” You asked yourself with a soft sigh as you filled your bucket to the brim and then began your search for the berry bushes. “Living in fear, being humiliated, and having my dignity stepped on each day...is this that much different?”

There was no point in your complaints, though you felt somewhat better; alone in the forest, you felt you could say whatever you needed to and there was no one to chide or dismiss you. And if you hadn’t heard the sudden crash coming from a few feet away, you would even go so far as to assume you were completely alone in the woods.

“Ah!”

The moan of pain sounded just almost inhuman; you nearly dropped your containers in fright until the source of the noise came crawling out from the brush with desperate, jerky motions.

“W-water…” the stranger edged closer and closer on his knees, not toward you, but toward the small spring. You trembled slightly as you peered at his shoulder, at a gaping wound that was sure to be infected or at the least the blood loss would kill him. It was staining his odd garb and made a trail in the grass as he dragged himself.

“I...w-wait!” You tore off a part of your thin sleeve and dipped it in your bucket. “Here, you shouldn’t move sir.”
The man looked at you through narrowed, hazy eyes; you doubted he could even see who was addressing him. “Who the hell are you?”

“Please, you’re hurt. I have water right here, I’ll help you.”

His whole body gave out on him as he laid face down in the grass; with much effort you propped him up against one of the trees and began wiping at his wound. You wanted to look away, but fear that this man would die in front of your very eyes kept you focused on the task at hand. In the middle of wrapping some more torn cloth around his gash, he awoke and stared around with a confused frown.

“Where….am I…?”

“In the woods...I saw you were hurt and washed your cut.” The term you used was an understatement, but the man didn’t seem to take notice; his fuzzy blue eyes were trained on your face, trying to make you out in the near darkness.

“Do you know what I am?”

“Yes…”

His tail couldn’t be more obvious; it even moved a bit as he was passed out and it nearly knocked over your bucket. Not that there was much water left; you felt dread well up in your stomach, knowing you failed at both of your chores and the punishment you would receive.

“Hey, why are you crying? I’m not going to hurt you.” the man said indignantly, though his voice was somewhat hoarse.

“I….no that’s not…” You wiped your eyes and hiccuped; the events of the day were becoming too much for you. “H-how is your shoulder feeling?”

“It’s alright. That spring water has healing properties, but I bet a human like you wouldn’t know anything about that.” his tone was awfully smug for someone who had come so close to falling ill, maybe worse. “That half breed mutt….I’ll show him next time around…”

“If it’s all the same to you, I should be going back to m-my home.”

“You don’t sound too happy about that; do you live in that little village in the east?”

You nodded and he laughed heartily. “Well then, I suppose I owe you, so I’ll do you a favor and call off my pack tonight. We were gonna raid it for the livestock, but I owe you some gratitude. Hey, cheer up, I told you I wasn’t going to-”

“I-I apologize!” You bowed feverently. “Please forgive me!”

“You quit groveling?! I’m not doing anything!” he growled, but the sound only made you shake harder. The man sighed heavily. “My name is Koga. I am the leader of the Yoro clan. From those clothes, I take it you’re a servant, huh?”

You merely stared at him warily and glanced at the empty bucket of water; Koga followed your gaze and sniffed.

“Humans sure can be dense. What the hell are you doing getting water so late?”

“My mistress sent me...I stained her robes while serving her tea, so she sent me out to fetch water to wash it out and berries for her paints…”
Koga’s frown deepened; humans always seemed to go on and on about the cruelty of his kind and how monstrous they were, yet they went around and treated their own species no better than dirt. It was truly laughable in his opinion, though he felt more off put by your demeanor at the moment. He was no scholar, but it was clear that you feared retribution once you returned to your village.

“It’s so dark already, can she even find her way home?” Koga wondered; the moon was rising in the sky. He used the dim light to check out his shoulder; you had done a good enough job treating it. “She used her own clothes? Surely someone like her doesn’t have anything...I gotta say, she’s got guts if she’s willing help a yokai. It’s...”

Koga cleared his throat. “There’s nothing to worry about in this forest at least; humans don’t know it, but all the demons in the area recognize this spring as somewhere sacred. I just barely made it here to seek it’s water for my wound.”

“I see.” You calmed down somewhat; he was a bit intimidating, but Koga didn’t make any move to attack you. “I hope it’s okay. I should be going; if I stay here any longer my punishment will be that much more severe.”

“Why don’t you just leave?”

To his surprise, you smiled just a little bit and then covered it with your hand. “Koga-sama, I apologize for smiling; you wouldn’t know, but for humans it’s not even legal for a young woman to travel alone, and even if I did, I would surely be killed or even kidnapped to work in the brothel or another nobleman’s home. No one in my village could care less for the suffering of a poor woman. I don’t have money or family or property...I am property.”

“You’re beautiful.”

Koga’s hand grasped your face, his claws barely scraping your cheek. “I couldn’t see it very well it was so dark just a few minutes before. Now I can see you and I’m kinda pissed.”

“I..what do you-?”

“This bruise on your cheek looks painful.”

“Ah!” You grabbed his hand to pull it away; Koga’s grip involuntarily tightened.

“Shit, sorry.” Koga stood up with a frown and bowed his head.

“I-it’s okay, I’m fine.” You said softly; you too stood up and gathered your things. “I really should be off while there’s some light to see. Goodbye Koga-sama, I hope your wound heals quickly.”

“Thanks. Goodbye…”

You could feel eyes on you as you made your way through the trees. “He doesn’t seem so bad. But I thought wolf yokai hunted humans…”

It was a puzzling thought, but even knowing what he was didn’t stop you from trying to help. The simple truth was, you hadn’t even thought much of the possibility of him slaying you; what would it matter if he did? There would be no one to mourn you, no one to care, and perhaps you’d finally be free of your life.

“How stupid.” You thought bitterly; there was no guarantee of a peaceful afterlife. Besides, you wanted to live as happily as you could, even if peaceful moments were rare. “I met a nice person today, even if they were a yokai. How many people can say they’ve met one and lived to tell about
it? Perhaps this is a blessing or a good omen.”

Or perhaps not, seeing as how you were spending roughly an hour wandering through the increasingly dense woods. The wind had picked up and the clouds that floated past were covering the moon and thus covering your only source of light. On top of it all, every tree and bush looked exactly the same, you couldn’t even hear the running spring as you walked.

“Please, please, I need to get out of here!” You were close to tears, the frustration and anxiety causing you to walk faster and faster, sweat running down your neck as you moved. It was simply too dark to make out where you were going, and all hope of returning to your mistress in a timely manner was lost.

“I don’t even have the water and berries; she would have punished me either way.” You moaned in despair. “I’ll have to just find somewhere to camp out at this rate.”

You slowed your pace and stared up at the half hidden moon pleadingly. “I should have had enough sense to bring a lantern. I just need a little light.”

You looked forward and the horizon glowed.

“What? Is it morning already?” You blinked and rubbed your eyes in disbelief; you were certain only an hour or so had passed since you left the spring, but right before your eyes was a bright glow in the distance that seemed to stretch as if the sun was about to rise. You might have even continued to believe it was early dawn, if not for the smoke that was steadily rising from where the light blazed.

You dropped your things and ran toward your burning village.
“Good morning.” Koga knelt over you as your eyes began to focus and your head began to ache; you smelled smoke.

“Oh my god.” You sat up quickly; despite your head spinning, you stayed up and stared at Koga with wide eyes. “Koga-sama, where am I? Did you see the fire? What-?”

“Hey, hey, calm down.” Koga gently pushed you back into the pile of pelts. “You’ve been out for a while, why don’t you have something to eat?”

“Koga-sama, my village is gone!” You rose up again and grabbed your head in your hands tightly. “I saw it, there was fire everywhere! I heard screaming, people were screaming for help, I-I saw-!”

“Sh, you gotta calm down.” Koga said and took you by the shoulders gently this time, concern etched across his face. “I know. I found you on the edge of the forest. My pack and I were just leaving when we came across you.”

“Your pack?”

Koga nodded. “They left to search for more food. There’s not many of us left…”

You stared at him and your eyes slowly roamed to take in your surroundings; Koga had taken you to a small cave. You looked out the entrance and saw the dark sky; the sun still hadn’t risen yet, but the small fire near the cave’s opening provided some light. Above the flames roasted a hunk of meat; Koga went over to it and slowly rotated the stick. You watched with caution as he cut off a bit and carried it to you on a flat disk.

“I told you already, we don’t hunt humans. This is deer.” Koga began tearing up the steaming meat with his own hands, and you briefly wondered why it didn’t burn him.

“Of course not, he’s a yokai. He probably swallows deers whole in his true form…” You frowned as you watched him arrange the food with what looked like makeshift chopsticks; you couldn’t help still feel a bit worried about Koga. He hadn’t actually done anything to hurt you, but at that same time, you just couldn’t forget what he was. You couldn’t understand why he was going out of his way for you.

“I know you probably use this to eat. Go on, it’s fine; you need to keep up your strength.”

You carefully took the ‘plate’ and the sticks; you felt you would barely be able to finish a few pieces, but decided to eat as much as you could. He looked so expectant and you gave him a grateful smile.

“How is it?”

“It’s good. Thank you Koga-sama.”

“Koga is fine. I’m happy you like it.” Koga reached out to take a piece of your hair in between his fingers; you nearly dropped your food as he tenderly twirled the lock of in his hand. “You know, I never really thanked you properly.”

As Koga stared down at you intensely, you shook your head. “It was no trouble. You were in a lot of pain.”
“Most humans would have let me suffer or even have me killed right there.” Koga let your hair slip from his fingers with a wistful smile. “You’re a kind person.”

“That’s…”

“The truth.” Koga said firmly; he took the food from your hands and set it aside. Your head began to throb as he picked you up and settled you on his lap with a toothy grin.

“W-what are you doing?” Your voice trembling from both fear and indignation, trying to feebly push at his chest; your body felt weak but you doubted even at your best strength you’d be able to push him away.

Koga laughed and put an arm around you tightly. “You’re even cuter when you’re being brave.” his sharp eyes seemed to lose focus the longer he stared at you. “Don’t freak out; I’ve just decided, you’re the perfect woman for me. I’ll repay you tenfold for what you did by making you my wife.”

“Koga, stop!” You grabbed the hand that was trailing down your waist; you knew it was only by his decision that he stopped, but you felt grateful all the same. “I-I should go home, maybe my mistress-”

“Is alive?”

You felt cold as he held you closer.

“That old bag is dead; all those people who stood by and let you be stepped on are dead. You won’t ever have to be scared again. Even out here, you can rest at ease knowing I’ll always be by your side to protect you. You’ll never have to live in servitude or even work; we can go from village to village and gather whatever things you may need.” Koga whispered as he brushed some hair from your perspiring face; you felt feverish and your face was burning. No man had ever spoken to you this way before.

“You’ll never be alone again. I will be your husband and my pack will become your family. We will all do our part to make you feel welcome and comfortable.”

You unconsciously leaned into his touch; this was the thing you had always dreamed of. Your freedom, your dignity restored, and someone to care for you as you were. Koga was smiling down at you so lovingly and he had been so considerate toward you.

You felt your nerves beginning to settle somewhat. “Even though he’s a yokai, Koga has been kinder to me than anyone else ever has.”

“Think about it; maybe it’s a bit fast, but most marriages are arranged for strangers, aren’t they? I love you more than anyone, and I’m devoted only to you. Isn’t that enough?” Koga raised your face to his. “I promise I won’t try to frighten or harm you. All I want is to make you happy…”

“K-Koga-” You blinked back tears as he hugged you; his arms were like strong bands, securing you to him and there was an unspoken oath of protection in his eyes. You cried into his neck and your hands grasped onto his shoulders. Koga seemed pleased by this response; his hand began to run up and down your back as he sighed in relief and closed his eyes.

“Never...has anyone said words like that to me...no one’s ever-” You bit your lip to keep a whimper from escaping, but Koga just patted your head comfortingly.

“Everything’s okay now. I know it must’ve been hard to see, but at least the root of your trouble is gone. You’re free and will never have to return to that woman again. She’s dead and gone.”
Koga opened his eyes slightly; you had stopped all movement.

“Koga….how do you know my mistress is dead?” You grew numb as Koga’s arms slide down your frame. “You said they’re all dead, but you said you had just come across me. How….how could you-?”

“Wait!” Koga blinked as you pulled back with a frozen expression. “Look, it’s okay now; they’re gone, that ugly woman can’t ever hurt you again. Isn’t that what you wanted? Aren’t you relieved?”

“It was you. You started the fire...did you and your pack-?” You felt your forehead throbbing even more and gasped. “I saw blood….I remember blood!”

Koga didn’t respond as you fell back onto the floor in pain, he merely stared at you sadly.

“I remember- my head felt like it had been nearly broken open, something hit it….I heard animals, I heard-I heard-!” You curled in on yourself and moaned in agony. “You, you did this. You slaughtered all those people! There were children, innocent people who did nothing wrong and you let them burn alive and be torn to shreds!”

Koga reached out for you, but you smacked the hand away; you were no longer afraid. You were angry; all your life, everything was out of your control. Now the only place you knew as home was gone and you were trapped with a murdering savage. “Now what?! Are you’re going to kill me? Are you going to violate me and tear me apart to feed your pack?! You monster, you fooled me, you’re just a monster!”

“Don’t say that. You’re just tired and weak...you don’t know what you’re saying.” Koga held you down as you made a run for the cave entrance; he was so fast, you could hardly believe he even moved. “I did it for you dammit! You were so scared….I adored you, what else was I supposed to do, let the woman I love be beaten to death?! I would never forgive myself if I let another person precious to me be hurt…”

Koga bowed his head. “It was my weaknesses that led most of my brothers to their deaths. I will never allow the people I care about to come to any harm.”

“I never wanted anyone dead.” You told him feebly and tried to rise, but he wouldn’t have it; he made you lie down and put a hand on your forehead.

“They deserved it. You’ll have a new home with me now, and you’ll see, we’ll be happy together.” Koga insisted with a toothy grin. “I swear, nothing will ever come between us. They’re all gone, just piles of ash and burnt flesh, they died like the worthless pigs they were.” Koga laid down next to you and brushed the back of his knuckles against your cheek. “I’ll look after you from now on.”

You pressed your hands into your eyes as tears streamed down into your hair.

“It’s you and me for life.”
“Welcome to the Host Club!”

“Good morning!” You waved to the boys with a polite smile.

“Oh it’s just you.” Hikaru and Kaoru said dismissively.

“How rude!” Tamaki stormed over to them with a scowl. “Greeting a lady like that-how can you call yourselves members of this group?!”

“C’mon boss, it’s not like she’s a customer.” Hikaru drawled as you wheeled in several boxed.

“That’s no excuse-!”

“Thank you for coming so promptly.” Kyoya nodded toward you, ignoring the squabbling. “We had an unfortunate accident involving the twins and we really weren’t expecting to have to order this season’s cups so soon.”

You blinked. “Accident? Is everyone okay…?”

“Hika-chan and Kao-chan made a mess!” Honey laughed as he bounced over to you with a bright smile. “It’s nice to see you again!”

“It’s nice to see you again too.” You smiled and turned to Kyoya. “Where do you want these?”

“Hm…Haruhi, come help take some of these to our storage room.”

Haruhi stepped away from the still arguing club members and sighed. “Hey, I thought my days as the Host club’s dog were over?”

“You still have quite a way to go before paying off your debt.” Kyoya reminded her bracingly. “Unless of course, you don’t want me to take 5% off your interest every time you help with chores?”

“When the heck did that start?!” Haruhi exclaimed in disbelief.

“Kyoya, don’t tease him. I’m sorry, he knows it’s part of my job to unload the cups and make sure they get to their destination safely, whether it’s to a storage closet or the table itself.” You told Haruhi with a little salute. “Company policy.”

“Oh…” Haruhi mumbled.

Kyoya adjusted his glasses. “I wasn’t teasing, the policy merely slipped my mind.”

“Right.” You said as you began wheeling the cart away. “Just on the shelves then?”

“Yes, do be careful.”

“You know it-”

Kyoya scribbled down the time of arrival on the delivery slip with an amused half smile; he glanced down at Haruhi, who hadn’t taken her eyes off him since you left.

“Is there a problem?”
“No...it’s just…” Haruhi looked sideways at where you had gone. “I guess I’m surprised?”

“Whatever of?”

“Oh, I know just what you mean Haruhi!” Tamaki removed himself from the twins glares and stood next to Kyoya with a mischievous smile.

“Haruhi, I highly recommend not listening to delusional idiots. It may ruin whatever common sense a person possesses.” Kyoya had turned away and began going through appointments in his notebook. Tamaki just continued to smile fondly at Haruhi. “It’s weird seeing him so relaxed, right?”

Kyoya lowered his notebook and sighed “What in the world are you babbling about now?”

Just as Tamaki was about to speak, you came back through the closet door. “Kyo, did you take my recommendation for jasmine phoenix pearls?”

“Yes, I even got a special deal from the company in exchange for providing my father’s blessing. They make excellent tea, but their marketing strategy is lacking; once my father’s company assists them, we will all see excellent profits.”

“Business as usual.” Tamaki sighed.

Kyoya shrugged. “This deal will be both beneficial to the image for our health care services and to their business; the public finds charm in quaintness and quality, so jasmine phoenix pearl tea will be a success. It’d be foolish not to pursue it.”

“Kyoya, don’t forget to actually try some of the tea, okay?” You couldn’t help laugh at his perturbed expression.

“Of course. Though I daresay I won’t have much time to sample it while here.”

“But you’re a host. Don’t you take tea with your patrons?”

“Kyo-chan usually talks with the ladies, but he never really just sits down with them.” Honey chimed in.

“Huh, now that you mention it…” Haruhi put a finger to her chin thoughtfully. “I’m surprised you’re as popular as you are if you barely even spend time with them…”

“Kyoya’s always been able to draw people in; he’s got the whole cool, aloof thing going, but everyone knows he’s just a sweetheart.”

Kyoya sent you a dull look. “Where in the world do you get these ideas? I swear, you’re nearly as bad as Tamaki.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” Tamaki asked fretfully; Haruhi sighed and ushered him away before Kyoya could continue.

“Speaking of business, I have something to discuss with you.” Kyoya closed his book to give you his attention. “Are you free sometime in the afternoon tomorrow? We can schedule another time if it’s more convenient, I understand this request was quite sudden.”

“Of course, I’m here for whatever you need.” You nodded and lifted up the handles of the cart. “I need to get going now though, have fun!”

“Have fun?” Kyoya looked on as you waved goodbye to everyone. “You say the strangest
“Thank you for arriving so promptly. May I offer you something to drink?”

“You don’t have to be so rigid Kyoya; even if this is for business, there’s really no need to tiptoe around me.” You told Kyoya as he led you to the sitting room; a maid came just as the two of you settled on the chairs and brought a platter of horderves and tea. “Oh, is this the jasmine tea?”

“Yes. I didn’t get a chance to sample it earlier, so I thought why not for our meeting?” Kyoya took the small kettle and poured your tea for you. “Is this fine? We have cream and sugar, though I know you prefer your tea natural.”

“This is perfect, and it smells even better than the first time I had it!” You thanked him and gently blew on the steam to cool your drink.

“Is it good?”

“Yes, I love this and the horderves look delicious.”

“Our cook made the snacks...I brewed the tea.”

Your mouth took the shape of an ‘o’. “You? Wow, you did a really good job!”

“Is it surprising? Did you think if I made the tea it would be bland or too bitter?” Kyoya asked he took a sip from his own cup, back straight and head barely lowered to drink. You smiled and giggled slightly, hoping he didn’t take offense.

“Not at all, I’m just a bit surprised you’d bother. Then again, your family practices tea ceremonies, yes?”

“That’s right. I’m not partial to them myself, they’re quite tedious.” Kyoya let out a long suffering sigh from just remembering going through the steps. “Speaking of tedious, I can understand working in your family’s company, but why on earth did you decide to work with deliveries? You’re reasonably intelligent, wouldn’t you prefer something a bit less physically demanding?”

“I guess you have a good point. My parents are mostly humoring me….I know it may seem odd, but I really do enjoy delivering. I like to see our customers and talk to them and know the people who use our products. It’s more fun than working in an office.”

“I’m surprised your family is fine with you working in such a menial position. Surely they want you
more involved with the company’s financial affairs?”

“They think it’s weird, but they said they’re happy as long as I am; I know you must think I’m wasting my education and opportunity to be part of something more meaningful, but I’ve never had your drive....besides, they’ve been so busy dealing with some issues with our stocks. I feel a bit guilty really.” You sighed. “I can’t do anything to help them. We’re doing well at the present, but our future isn’t so secure anymore.”

Kyoya set down his cup on the tray. “I was quite sorry to hear that. Your family’s enterprise provides exceptional products.”

“Kyoya, you haven’t said a word about what you came here to discuss.”

He cocked his head slightly to peer at you over the rim of his glasses. “Oh? Do you have somewhere else to be?”

“No, but I’m a bit taken aback. It’s not like you; you usually just get straight down to business.” You smiled as you inhaled some of the tea’s aroma. “I distinctly remember you telling me how much you found small talk and—how’d you put it? ‘Idle conversation’s droll and pointless’?”

“I still think so. I just happen to enjoy talking with you.”

You stared at him, not sure what to say. Kyoya saved you the trouble by giving you a smile and handing you the platter of horderves.

“Are you hungry? It’s nearly dinner time and I made you come all the way here. Please, help yourself.”

“Oh, yes, thank you.” You took one of the snacks and popped it into your mouth. “They are good. Anyway, I am curious. What did you want to talk about Kyoya?”

“It’s simple really. I wanted to discuss a business venture with you. I’ve already dropped a few hints and tidbits to my father about your family’s situation. He seems somewhat interested in buying up some of the company’s shares.”

“He is?” Your eyebrows were raised in surprise, and the weight that had been increasingly piled upon your shoulders was minimal. Kyoya nodded and crossed his legs with a kind smile.

“Of course, he feels a bit cautious. He wants to buy up 80% and he’s not sure how your family would feel about our company owning such a large proportion.”

“Your father is an accomplished business man...I think as long as our finances were stable again, my parents would have no issue over giving away more control, just as long as they received their due profit.” You smiled softly. “Kyoya, thank you. This is amazing, it means so much—”

“You’ve only heard half of the proposal.” Kyoya told you evenly. “As I stated, my father is still a bit uncertain about this. While he is more than confident in his abilities to bring your family’s company back to a more profitable state, he also doesn’t believe in making rash decisions. He’s asked me personally to go to you first and to get a better picture of your circumstances.” Kyoya’s lips quirked up a bit at your confused expression. “In other words, he’s given me the responsibility of scoping out this deal. My findings is the only thing between making this deal a reality and your family’s ruin.”

“I...” You were speechless; you were well aware of how shrewd and ruthless the Ootori’s could be when it came to business, but Kyoya had never spoken to you this way. It was as if he were trying to intimidate you, but for what purpose you hadn’t the slightest idea.
“Then, what is it that will convince you? What is the second part of your proposal?” You asked him cautiously; Kyoya chuckled. You put down your tea as he stood in front of you and took your hand, only causing you to become more bewildered; shaking hands to seal the deal really wasn’t Kyoya’s style, but once again, he astonished you by getting down on one knee.

“A proposal.”

Kyoya took both your hands in his and lowered his head slightly. “I will put it simply for your sake: become my wife, and I will save your family’s enterprise.”

“Kyoya...you-this is-

“-An exchange that will only result in combining two fine companies and two successful families.”

“You must be joking.” You felt frozen in place; Kyoya would never do something like this just to secure a business negotiation.

“This isn’t just a way to boost my position in my father’s company; it will save your family from a financial crisis and debt.” Kyoya said with little emotion.

“I’m sorry, but I’ll have to turn you down.” You shook off his hands and stormed away. “I’m not a commodity to be bargained over.”

You gasped as you were easily pulled back down onto the couch; Kyoya looked down at you with a searching gaze.

“This is more than just a successful business venture; that’s not even the main reason why I brought it up in the first place.” Kyoya’s hands fell over yours, an indescribable look overtaking his normal expression. “I swear it...you’re not just a means to an end.”

“Kyoya, I…” You swallowed as he looked into your eyes, his own swimming with restraint emotions.

"I still can’t accept.” Kyoya was silent as you began to pull back. “Please understand, I just don’t feel ready for marriage.”

“You don’t feel ready for marriage or do you just not return my feelings? Please spare me from false assurances. It’s insulting.”

“Kyoya, please don’t do this.”

“Do what? Be honest? Here’s some honesty for you; if you won’t agree to my proposal, I’m sure I can convince my father to wait until your company fails and buy them out, leaving your family with no power or dignity.”

You flinched and became unnerved by his stare. “You wouldn’t. Kyoya, you would never-”

“I must admit, I’m sorry to make you think less of me…” Kyoya smiled sadly and cupped your face. “You always look at me so fondly; even so, don’t mistake my affection for weakness. You have two choices here. Refuse my offer, and your company will be ground to the dust,” he caressed your pale cheek as your mouth trembled; to him you almost looked to be anxious for him to come closer, but he knew better than to delude himself. “Or, you can accept, save your family’s business, further their reputation, and become my wife. There is no downside to this agreement; you would gain both success and a devoted husband, willing to do anything to keep you happy.”
“Except give me my freedom.”

“Freedom? Money can set you free; imagine how easier our lives are compared to others due to our privilege and status? Now you may be well off, but if you become part of my family, you would have every comfort imaginable. All you have to do is give me yourself in exchange for everything else I could give you in return. Wouldn’t you say I’m being generous?”

“I don’t have a choice; this is blackmail.” You said quietly; he had you backed into a corner. You felt sick as he smiled down at you vaguely. After what seemed like an hour of silence, you took your hands away and hugged yourself tightly, as if you could somehow make yourself small enough to disappear. “Kyoya, why? Why are you doing this?!”

“I’m in love with you.” Kyoya answered simply. “Isn’t that enough of a reason?”

“This isn’t right.”

Kyoya sighed patiently. “Don’t be childish. You have a choice; it just so happens this is an offer you’d be foolish to refuse. You’ll come to see this is the best for everyone in due time. Now, should I go inform my father of our decision?”

You folded in on yourself and sniffed. “...yes. I accept.”

“I’ll go tell him right away.” Kyoya raised your face to his and gave you a chaste kiss. “There’s no time to waste my dear.” he smiled as you looked at him blankly. “My, what am I saying? We have the rest of our lives.”
Mitsukuni "Honey" Haninozuka

Ten Years Ago:

“I didn’t need your help…”

“But.”

You wiped your eyes and glared up at Honey. “I never asked for your help! Why couldn’t you just let me handle it myself?”

Honey’s shoulders sank slightly; he stared down at you still crumpled on the ground with sorrowful eyes. “They were being mean, I just wanted to-”

“I’m strong too!” You cut him off once more; you struggled to stand up, but lost your balance once more. “I can fight, just because you’re a boy, doesn’t mean you’re stronger!”

“But I couldn’t just let them hurt you….that’d be really bad…”

You fell back on the ground in defeat; this whole mess was your doing, so you knew you had no right to snap at him. Even so, you felt so embarrassed; you realized how foolish you must’ve looked challenging three boys to a fight and they had beaten you with no problem.

“If Mitsukuni-kun didn’t step in, I’d be in bigger trouble.” You told yourself as you attempted to stand; when you raised your leg earlier to kick one of the boys, he had grabbed it to block; instead, it had been twisted.

“Are you mad at me?” Honey sat down beside you, large eyes brimming with tears; he kept his gaze to the ground and hugged himself tightly. You immediately felt even worse; you slumped against the school’s wall alongside him.

“No...I’m mad at myself.”

Honey gave you a questioning look as you handed him a handkerchief without looking at him; he took it from your fist and blew his nose loudly, causing you to wince at the mess the cloth would be.

“Why?”

“I hate that all the boys think I shouldn’t do martial arts because I’m a girl. It’s not fair! I’m strong too!” You insisted angrily. “And you’re the best in the class and you had to come save me….I looked so dumb…”

“That’s not true! Those boys are dumb!” Honey told you. “I think you’re really good...I don’t even like practicing, but my daddy makes me…”

You blinked. “Really? You don’t like it Mitsukuni-kun?”

“Not really.”

“Oh…”

“I’m sorry.”
“You didn’t do anything wrong...I’m sorry for yelling at you.”

“Can I help you up?”

You nodded. “Okay. Mitsukuni-kun, why did you help me? Those boys could’ve beat you up too.”

Honey giggled. “I like you; friends help friends, don’t they?” he pouted. “A-aren’t we friends?”

You frowned slightly. “Okay, but I can still take care of myself.”

“Alright, but if you can’t you have to let me help!”

“Okay.”

“And you gotta call me Honey!”

You cringed a bit as he offered out his hand to lift you up; despite being just a couple years older than you, he was somehow able to help you up effortlessly. Despite your slight embarrassment, you grasped it and smiled wearily.

“Eh, can’t I call you something else?” You asked him uncertainly. “How about we just call each other by our first names?”

“R-really?”

“Mhm.” You nodded and smiled sincerely at his overjoyed expression; it was a look you would grow to cherish as the years went by. “And, thank you.”

“You were so cute back then!” Honey held Usa-chan so tightly you thought the stuffing would come out of the seams.

“Mitsu-kun, did you really have to tell them that story?!” You screeched and covered your face with a couch cushion.

“Please refrain from chewing up our furniture.” Kyoya reminded; even he wore an amused smile.

“You used to be a delinquent?” Hikaru laughed brazenly. “Honey-senpai, tell me you just made that all up? I mean-”

“We knew you could be stubborn, but you were violent? Scary girl~” Kaoru chimed in with a devious grin to match Hikaru’s.

“Hey, I’ve matured a lot since then!” You argued.

“Hm.”

“Mori-senpai, what’s that supposed to mean?!”
“Oh my so spirited~!” Tamaki gushed. “But what happened next? Did you fall for your savior? I bet Honey-senpai swept you off your feet and you thought to yourself, “Oh my, this will surely be the man who~”

“Tama-chan, don’t be mean.” Honey pouted.

“Me, mean?!”

“Yeah boss, stop teasing her.” Hikaru and Kaoru said dully. “Some prince.”

“I don’t wanna hear that from you two troublemakers!” Tamaki shouted indignantly. “Why when I think of all the times you two~”

You sighed along with Haruhi as the bickering commenced; Kyoya paused to watch for a moment before turning to greet some new customers.

“So, you guys are really together now?”

“Yep.” Haruhi replied blandly.

You looked on as Tamaki’s gesturing escalated wildly. “Don’t get me wrong, Suoh seems nice, but….”

“He’s an idiot, right?”

You shrugged but Haruhi just laughed.

“I understand what you mean.” she told you with an oddly fond smile. “His ego is obnoxious and he can be so overdramatic it gives me a headache…but he’s more than meets the eye. Most of the hosts are when you get to know them.”

“You’d know better than me.” You replied as Mori and Honey entertained some swooning girls a few tables over. “I’m not surprised Mitsu-kun joined up seeing as how he gets to eat all the cake he wants, but I didn’t expect him to be so popular.”

Haruhi studied you curiously. “Why?”

You glanced from her to the smiling Honey. “It’s just….he’s a third year now and he still looks so young. After all these years he doesn’t look much older than how he did when we were little.”

“Yeah, it’s still kind of confusing to me too, but the ladies really seem to enjoy it.” Haruhi said carelessly; she leaned in slightly and lowered her voice. “Speaking of being interested, have you said anything to Mori-senpai yet?”

“You’d better keep it down!” You whipped your head around; Mori, Honey, and the customers were looking over at you and Haruhi curiously and you wished you could discreetly cover your red cheeks.

“I’m not the one shouting…”

“Sorry.” You whispered. “I haven’t said anything…I don’t think it’s gonna happen. I’m sure Morisan’s the type of guy who likes, you know…cute girls…”

“You never know. Mori-senpai seems to think highly of you; I’m sure it’s worth a shot to at least be honest with him.”
“I guess...anyway, I should get going, I need to be home soon.”

“Alright, thank you for visiting.” Haruhi smiled warmly and you heard her screaming for Tamaki to let her go as soon as you left the room.

“They’re sweet together.” You thought absently as you walked down the empty hallways. “I know I’m not a classic beauty and I’m not very calm or patient….but maybe I can have something like that someday.”

Your thoughts turned to Mori; his presence was so calming and made you feel secure. In all likelihood, he would never see you as more than maybe a younger sister or a friend of Honey’s, but you could still dream. The high windows made sunlight stream into the building and you stopped to stare at the bright blue sky; for a few moments you stood there and took in the sights, wishing you could see it with someone.

“.Mori-san…” You sighed softly. “I wonder if he’d think this was pretty…”

“Why did you leave so quickly?”

You put on a bracing smile and waved at Honey. “Sorry, I needed to get home.”

“Oh.” Honey walked over and leaned against the window sill. “It’s really pretty isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s beautiful weather today.” You smiled; your expression fell at his stoic look. “Are you okay? Don’t tell me they ran out of cake?”

“Can you tell me the truth?”

“About what?”

“You like Takashi...don’t you?”

You felt your face heat up. “I-I-!” you quickly looked around. “Was it that obvious? Did you hear me and Fujioka talking?!?”

“Is it because he’s tall?” Honey stood to his full height; he was about a head or so shorter than you, but that didn’t stop him from making you feel small from his stare alone. “Takashi’s so mature looking. I guess I can see it….why you’d like him best.”

“Mitsu-kun, did you hear-” You frowned sadly at his hollow expression. “Oh no, I didn’t mean to insult you. I just-”

“You just think I’m still a little kid. You think I’m childish.”

“No, that’s not,” You hesitated. “It’s nothing personal, I just like Mori-san.”

“But not me?”

“Of course I like you-”

“But you like Takashi best! Takashi isn’t even that grown up!” Honey replied lowly; you felt the urge to clean out your ears at his hostile tone. Never once in all the years you had spent around Honey, you had never heard him utter a single insult toward his cousin. It just didn’t happen, it was impossible.

“I’m stronger than him...I could beat him in a fight no problem.”
“Mitsu-kun, don’t say that!”

“It’s the truth. And there’s something you don’t seem to get. I’m not going to stand in Takashi’s shadow anymore and if he has a problem with it, then I’ll take care of it.” In the blink of an eye, you were suddenly at his eye level, arms wrapped around your body and keeping you from falling with ease. “I’m not a kid.”

Your gasp was muffled by his lips; you could smell whipped cream and frosting the second he pulled away with a little smile.

“I’ll be the man you depend on.”
“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Hisoka sulked, his careless smile vanishing as he scanned the shelves of the convenience store.

“It has to be here!” Hisoka went down every aisle, studying every package of food and every shelf, but to no avail.

You looked up from your book; you sat perched on a stool behind the cash register, warily eyeing him.

“What’s he looking for?” you wondered; you had sort of hoped he would just get whatever he needed to buy and leave quickly. It wasn’t every day you saw a man who looked akin to a clown.

“Or maybe a jester? Whatever he’s supposed to be, he’s kind of creepy looking.” You discreetly snuck glances over the top of your book as Hisoka continued what seemed like a fruitless search. After another minute, you felt a bit bad at his disappointed frown.

“Excuse me sir, can I help you with anything?”

Hisoka turned to you, a slow smile coming to his face; perhaps he was trying to be friendly, but it made you a bit uneasy all the same.

“Yes, do you have Bungee Gum?”

“Bungee Gum? I’m sorry sir.”

“Oh please, call me Hisoka. Sir has such a serious connotation, so bland.” Hisoka insisted.

“Hisoka...well, I’m very sorry, but we’ve stopped carrying that brand a month ago.”

Hisoka sighed lightly. “Oh well.”

You thought for a moment. “Um, could you wait here a second?”

Without waiting for a reply, you disappeared inside of the back room, Hisoka looking after you somewhat curiously.

"What a jumpy girl." he observed as you came back with a pleased smile. "What in the world is she-?"

“Here.”

You held out a crate to him; it was full of packages of gum. Hisoka took it with wide eyes and an ecstatic smile.

“These have sort of just been sitting in the back.” You explained; you had to admit, he looked oddly cute now, like an excited little kid. “We were going to just get rid of them, but if you want, please take them.”

“How generous of you.” Hisoka’s grin stretched the width of his face, making his eyes look like slits.

“Oh, it’s no problem. It’d be a waste to just throw them out after all.” You said feeling a bit nervous
under his cunning gaze; there was something about this man that gave you the impression of a mischievous child who enjoyed burning ants with a magnifying glass.

“What a sweet girl you are.” Hisoka reached over and patted your head; his touch made you go cold. After one last smile, he began walking out of the store with a cheerful wave. “Thank you very much. I’ll see you around!”

“I think I’m just being suspicious.” You told yourself as you sat back down behind the counter. “Okay, he looks odd, but he seems perfectly friendly.”

Over the next three months, Hisoka would periodically pop into the convenience store, sometimes with a friend with an oddly blank stare, but mostly alone. While his presence was somewhat off-putting, he never did anything to warrant alarm. Hisoka smiled, made conversation, bought a snack, and left.

Still, there was something about his manner that made you uneasy; he said very odd things, especially when you overheard the things he’d say to his friend. Something about prey and waiting; about hunters and fighting; he talked with an air of excitement and seemed to take pleasure on the thought of hurting someone.

“That’s none of my business though.” You told yourself as Hisoka took his time looking through the pastry display; his friend stood nearby, staring idly at nothing in particular.

“What would you recommend?” Hisoka asked Illumi lightly. “I can't decide between chocolate or strawberry.”

“Hisoka, can you just finish your business here swiftly?”

“Alright, give me a sec.” Glancing over to make sure you weren’t looking, Hisoka covered the security cameras lens with his “Bungee gum”.

“Hi Hisoka.” You greeted with a small smile; you nodded to Illumi politely. He kept silent, staring back and forth between Hisoka and you slowly.

“Hello.” Hisoka grinned, baring his teeth as he laughed slightly. Illumi made a small impatient noise in his throat. “Just get on with it. You certainly love to drag things out.” he mentioned lightly.

Hisoka frowned. “Alright, alright…. spoil my fun won't you?”

You looked at them both quizzically. “What does-?”

Your sharp scream was muffled by Hisoka’s “gum”. The pink matter stretched from your mouth to your whole body; you lost your balance and crashed to the floor as the substance wrapped you in a tight cocoon.

“Knock her out, we don't need her seeing the way there.” Illumi said as Hisoka hefted you onto his shoulder like a sack.

With a gleeful smile, Hisoka reached for the back of your head and tapped it; in an instant, the world went dark.
“Hey, you up yet?”

You stirred at the playful voice; prying your eyes open, you could faintly see a man looming over you. You tried to scoot away, but found yourself bound by ropes.

“Don't bother, you're way too weak to break them.” Hisoka told you; at least, you thought it was him. The hair was falling in his face, and the face paint gone, but he still wore the same look of vicious excitement you had seen before you had fallen unconscious.

Hisoka laughed loudly at your confusion. “Silly girl. No, you're definitely no good for fighting. How disappointing...still, even I need to relax now and then!” he sighed and flopped down next to you. “You'd make a good pet though, as long you manage to keep me entertained; if you can’t do that, I might just get angry.” he added coldly as he poked the tip of your nose.

“I want to go.” You felt tears well up in your eyes; you had no idea where you were, only that you were stranded with a man who seemed to have no qualms about kidnapping you in broad daylight or harming you if he felt moved to do so. Hisoka stroked your cheek with surprising tenderness.

“But I don’t want you to go.” he chuckled lowly; there was a very subtle, but clear threat in his tone. You didn’t dare move your face from his touch. It was as if a cobra was watching you, ready to strike at the slightest provocation.

“Now, now, don't look at me like that. If anything, think of this as a valuable life lesson.” Hisoka pecked your cheek with a giddy smirk. “You really should be more careful who you’re nice to. Lucky you have me here to teach you, huh?”

You let your tears fall as Hisoka licked the shell of your ear.

“Let’s have some fun, okay?”
You had to have a strong mind and will to do the job you did.

Some people may say working for the Zoldycks wasn’t much different from getting a death wish and you could see why one might think so; they were a family of highly skilled assassins and they obviously had no qualms about killing. In addition, you were a servant and they were your superiors in nearly every way; one mistake might result in the most literal form of termination.

But this wasn’t necessarily true; in fact, while it was clear you knew your place, the job was far from dangerous.

Well, mostly; being a servant to the Zoldyck household wasn’t for just anyone. Aside from your duties as a cook, (which was a very difficult position to obtain seeing as how it required the family to put some of their trust into someone who might get the notion to lethally poison or tamper with their food) you were also a part time bodyguard with your own set of combat skills.

“Not that they can’t take care of any disturbances themselves.” You laughed lightly as you finished cleaning up the kitchen; the pots and pans were hung precariously on their racks, the counters and floors shined, and the dishes were scrubbed and put neatly away. It was a shame you’d have to repeat the whole process tomorrow.

You put a finger to your chin thoughtfully. “Probably not to the same scale though. It’s rare the whole family has the chance to sit down together for dinner. Well, everyone minus young master Killua...”

After another glance around the room, you exited and made your way to your chambers; it was a bit of a walk from the kitchen, but you understood that servants were expected to stay off in their own area, not mingle around in the main wing of the house. Yet despite your respect of professional boundaries, that line would be crossed as you found yourself facing Illumi.

“Good evening master Illumi.” You bowed lowly; Illumi nodded slightly, the motion striking you as unnatural, not due to it’s stiffness, but due to the odd glint in his eye. You were one of the servants especially hired to serve Illumi, and by now you had become accustomed to feeling both a bit in awe and a bit fearful of him, in addition to becoming familiar with his moods as emotionless as he came across. Tonight he seemed somewhat troubled and you briefly wondered if it would be out of bounds to ask why.

“You are staring.”

Illumi’s absent tone cut through your thoughts and you bowed once more to him in apology.

“Forgive me master Illumi, I was lost in thought.” You explained and rose up to his blank face. “If I may be so bold, might I ask if there’s anything troubling you?”

Illumi blinked slowly and cocked his head to the side. “What makes you think I am troubled?”

“You don’t look well master Illumi. If there is something I can assist you with, I will be sure to do whatever I can to help.”

“Hm.” Illumi seemed to stare through you curiously, but you recognized the look he took on while analyzing. Hopefully he wasn’t analyzing whether killing you would be too much of a bother at this late hour.
“Killua has been gone for quite some time...he has been increasingly disobedient and will not see that he is straying off to the wrong path.”

You felt a bit of pity rise in your chest; as cold as Illumi was, there were these rare moments of genuine emotion that almost made him seem not too different than any other man. You wondered if he was revealing his worries out of viewing you as a trusted confidant or simply because he had no one else to voice these worries to.

One thing you knew for sure was that being a Zoldyck seemed to be a very lonely and somber life; you certainly couldn’t understand why Illumi found his profession so enjoyable, but then again, that was why you were the servant. Perhaps if you had the same drive and bloodlust you could use your abilities to pursue a similar career, but you had no desire to live such a life.

“Master Illumi, I understand your concern, but young master Killua will be just ‘master’ soon.” You said carefully. “I don’t think there’s much we can do if he chooses to stray from the Zoldyck family legacy. I’m sure he will be fine in whatever he does; he’s as talented and strong as his older brother.” You smiled in what you hoped was a soothing way; Illumi just looked almost sad.

“He needs my guidance. I am his older brother, I must show him the right way.” Illumi seemed to completely disregard your words, though you had expected as much; he simply refused to see what was seemingly obvious. Killua didn’t want this life and chances are he’d never stop trying to get away from it.

Illumi looked straight into your eyes. “I’m worried for him. I must protect him from himself.”

You smiled. “What a good big brother you are master Illumi.”

“Would she say such a thing if she knew what I had implanted into my brother’s mind? A woman like her would never understand this family, our way of life.” Illumi stared dully at your warm expression.

“I should return to my quarters. Please let me know if you need anything master Illumi.” You bowed once more and waited for him to pass you.

“Thank you for your concern.” Illumi brushed past you without so much as a glance and left you momentarily stunned in the secluded hallway.

The weeks went by with little incident; Killua eventually returned from his solo mission, but you had no doubt he would one day leave the mansion and never return. It made you a bit sad as you personally felt very empathetic to him, but you ultimately knew it was the best thing for him. He was no ruthless killer and to see him so unhappy made you feel pained yourself.

The more Killua rebelled, the more Illumi confided in you to the point you conversed with him almost periodically; you never took much liberty in voicing your opinions, but your dutiful silence seemed more than enough to bring him some reassurance. You were a bit flattered, but decided not to let it go to your head; after all, the only people the Zoldycks were loyal to was each other, and you were under no illusions that Illumi considered you more than a trusted servant.

“Perhaps we didn’t shock him with enough electricity.” Illumi pondered absently as he lounged in
your bed; you were perched on the armchair by your night table, wondering if Illumi realized how strange a scenario this all was. Most likely he wouldn’t care either way. “What do you think?”

You started slightly; he had never asked your opinions before on the subject of education and training in the Zoldyck household.

“It doesn’t matter what I think Master Illumi.” You replied calmly. “This should be discussed by the Zoldyck family, not their servants.”

“I wish to discuss it with you.” Illumi replied, his normal trance like voice giving away a hint of irritation at what he assumed was your stalling.

“I suppose if I was in your position, I would be worried.” You confessed after some deliberation. “But I would let him find his own way. How else will he grow?” you posed your question to no one in particular, but Illumi answered nonetheless.

“He won’t grow if he’s dead.”

You felt a bead of sweat roll down the nape of your neck. “I suppose you have a point Master Illumi.”

“Killua should stay out of fights he can’t win. There’s no point.” Illumi said softly; he turned to you. “I appreciate this.”

You smiled warmly. “Think nothing of it. It’s my sworn duty to look out for you after all.”

For a week, Illumi had stopped venting to you. He didn’t treat you any differently than usual, so you assumed he was busy or perhaps he was trying to figure out what to do about Killua.

“I hope it works out.” You nestled down into your bed and nodded off halfway during your reading; you didn’t stir as your bedroom door was slowly opened with a slight creak or even when the book was removed from your limp hands. Illumi stared down at you contemplatively and withdrew a needle from his pocket.

“Listen to me because you want to, not because it’s your duty.” Illumi whispered; he took a breath and activated his Nen. Once again, you didn’t stir, seeming not to sense a thing. You had been looking very tired lately, a bit strung out; he liked to think it was because of his lack of attention.

“Stay by my side and wish you were there when I’m gone.”

The needle was slowly inserted into the back of your skull, piercing the skin quite painlessly; you’d never even know.

Illumi held onto the end of the needle with the utmost care; this couldn’t go wrong.

“Keep yourself safe and alive in my absences. Keep me in your thoughts always.”

Illumi felt no guilt as you came to him the next day with a wide smile and a small blush staining your cheeks.

This was the most logical conclusion to take if he wanted to keep you close.
Author's Note: Just as a quick memo, I was thinking of Killua at least being in his late teens in this story; I know many of my readers are around his canon age range, but as a 22 year old, it's a bit too weird for me personally writing him in a romantic situation at that age. Enjoy!

“Hmm…”

You tapped your tongs on the glass case as Gon bent over to study the pastries; as much as you agreed with the phrase, ‘patience is a virtue’, you had never claimed to be a saint.

“She’s…”

Your grip tightened on the tongs when his eyes lit up and his pointer finger began to gesture to pick out a muffin. And then he frowned in concentration and pulled it back to his lip, eyes flitting over to the cookies.

“She’s…”

“Just pick something!” Killua snapped, looking ready to throttle his friend.

“Give me a minute!”

“A minute? It’s been ten!”

You smiled wryly. “Guys, you’re scaring my customers.”

“Sorry.” Gon shrugged. “Okay, okay, I’ll get a loaf of the pretzel bread and some rock candy.”

“Strawberry or blueberry?”

“She’s…”

“Dammit.” Killua slapped his forehead. “Stop asking him questions, he gets confused enough at basic math.”

“No I don’t just the hard stuff like long division and multiplication and adding.”

Killua sighed heavily and you giggled behind your hand.

“How about a stick of both? I’ll give them to you half off this time.” You began taking down the candy at the racks before looking for the bread packages.

“You shouldn’t encourage him not being able to make up his mind.” Killua drawled.

“Well, you guys are my best customers.” You said simply as you rang up Gon’s purchase. “And you wanted the truffles?”

“Yeah, same amount too.”

Killua kept a close eye on you as you began packing each truffle away in a decorative cardboard box; he had once told you nonchalantly, that Zoldycks were trained to always keep an eye on where their food was coming from. You thought it was a bit odd seeing as how he had also mentioned they were immune to most poisons, but you supposed a certain amount of paranoia is what came from that
sort of...lifestyle.

“It’s a good thing you guys came here now before business gets really busy. I doubt you’d even be able to get through the door next week.” You said as you handed Killua his change.

“What’s next week?” Gon asked; the words came out a bit muffled as he was already halfway through one strand of the rock candy.

“Valentine’s day; heck, I’m getting in orders for chocolate already too. It’s one of the busiest times of the year for our shop.” You explained.

“Sounds like a hassle.” Killua remarked.

“Aww, it’s okay. I like putting up decorations.” You shrugged. “If you guys get a chance, stop by, I’ll make sure to have some special chocolate put aside for you.”

Once you had bid them farewell and they were out the door, Gon busted out with a knowing grin in Killua’s direction.

While Killua considered himself a few steps above childish bickering, he did think it was prudent to smack his best friend a good one across the back of his head.

“Hey, I didn’t even say anything!” Gon rubbed the quickly growing lump. “It’s not my fault you’re so stubborn.”

“You’re not making any sense.”

“Come on, she said she was going to give you chocolates!”

“One, I don’t see what the big deal is, and two, I’m pretty sure she said she was going to give us chocolates leftover from the sale.”

Gon frowned. “She said she’d save special chocolate.” his sly grin returned full force as Killua rolled his eyes. “And she said they were for you, I remember, so there.”

“Whatver.”

“You can drop the cool guy act now, she’s not here.”

“Shut up!”

Killua stalked farther ahead, but Gon kept after him; it’s not like this was anything new, but as many times as Killua criticized him for being oblivious, he should take a look at himself to see how deep in denial he was.

“You know, I could give you some tips.”

“Huh?!” Killua felt his face freeze in discomfort as Gon looked thoughtful. “Tips about what?”

“Dating. I don’t mind, since you’ve never been on one before.”

Killua just glared at him, not sure whether Gon was teasing him or legitimately trying to help with a clearly (in his opinion) nonexistent problem. Whatever it was, Killua could barely contain his irritation and slight mortification as he took off without a word.

“Oh darn it.” Gon stopped and searched his jacket pockets frantically. “My wallet must have fell
from my pocket hole…”

“Well, maybe if you bothered to get a new jacket or fix the thing-”

“Killua, I have to get going, would you mind going back and getting it for me?”

“I don’t-"

“Kay, thanks!”

“Hey!” Killua growled under his breath as he watched Gon race off and disappear around the corner; then again, if he started running now, he could catch up to him without barely breaking a sweat.

“Well...I could go get some more candy while I’m there.” Killua smiled to himself a little. “I’ll take it from his wallet.”

Gon meanwhile was snickering to himself from not too far away; he knew Killua would take the bait. Maybe things for his friend would come easier if he went alone; he didn’t really get what the big deal about it all was, but the sooner Killua got to talking with you, the sooner he could be put out of his misery.

“Hey…” Gon felt in every single pocket on him. “Dammit, my wallet is gone!”

It was a bit odd though; the last thing anyone would expect to be on Killua’s mind was a girl. Sure, even if he was a teenager, he wasn’t exactly in the majority. It was hard enough making friends.

It was similar, but it also very different, and just like making friends, it came with this whole new set of emotions that weren’t the most pleasant to acknowledge, let alone actively pursue. Killua, despite his reluctance, couldn’t just smash down his emotions on a whim.

There were all sort of things that went through his mind when you were concerned; there was a weird sort of annoyance that came with the uncertainty, that was a given. There was embarrassment whenever he said something that might have sounded off or when Gon teased him in front of you. Then there came the stomach churning and the cotton mouth symptom, where his tongue was drying up and sticking to the roof of his mouth when you spoke directly to him. If you gave him a particularly nice smile at the same time as you spoke, he could actually feel the blood rush to his cheeks faintly.

But along with all these perturbing and uncomfortable feelings came some nice ones; the odd tightening in his chest and the irrational sense of bravado and pride that came with a compliment. When you remembered a particular pastry he enjoyed or took notice of the things he liked in general, Killua could barely control the impulse to grin triumphantly, especially when you were paying a bit more attention to him than Gon.

That being said, he never did go without his friend; not that he was too nervous to, but what would the two of you even talk about? Killua couldn’t imagine lingering to chat like Gon so often would; besides, it was nearly closing time, what if you had already gone home and another employee was locking up?

“Killua?”

“You gotta be kidding me…”

He had only come about halfway back to the sweets shop, but there you were, out of your uniform and in casual clothes. You looked a bit taken off guard yourself, but you were smiling all the same.
The thing was, you were right in front of him; no counter in the way, no expectation of getting in and getting out with a purchase, just you and him. There was no way around it; he would have to talk to you.

“Hey, is Gon with you? I found his wallet on the floor.”

A response shot out of Killua’s mouth sooner than he could think.

“What, were you going to look all over town just to bring it to him? Do you even know where he lives?”

“Uh, no. I was on my way home…” You said with a perplexed expression. “But since you’re here I thought-”

“I can give it back to him.”

Killua held out his hand and you obediently dropped the wallet into the open palm with some confusion. It’s not like he was that sociable to begin with, but you hadn’t heard Killua use such a curt and clipped tone of voice with you before.

“Okay.” You weren’t sure what else to say; Killua didn’t seem in the mood to talk, and you were frankly at a loss for a topic of conversation. “Thanks. I’ll see you next week then.”

“Are you walking straight home?” Killua asked abruptly.

“Yeah.”

“It’s pretty dark. Do you always go home so late?”

You shrugged. “I closed tonight.”

Killua looked toward the direction you were going. “Is it very far?”

“Not really, maybe twenty minutes away.”

“I’ll go with.”

“You don’t have to.” You were certain there was reluctance to his tone.

“Only a jerk would let a girl walk home alone; besides, I was going to ask you...about that chocolate you said you were going to give Gon and me.”

You both fell into step, walking side by side; every time you passed under a streetlight, you snuck a good look at Killua, particularly his eyes. There were so sharp, but there was this shine to them, like a lingering innocence. His body language screamed tension and there was a nervous twitch to his gait.

“Killua, you know…”

“Are we almost there?”

You internally winced but nodded with a grateful smile. “Yeah, it’s coming up on this corner. Thanks.”

“No problem...I can take care of anyone who would try to mess with you.” Killua’s fists curled up in his pockets. “Me and Gon are going to be staying here for a while.”
“Yeah?” You felt a bit lighter suddenly.

“Yeah, so,” Killua’s pace slowed down just so and he averted his gaze to the side of your face. “If you’re closing, why not just have me take you home? I mean, I don’t have anything better to do.”

“Oh no, I heard Gon talking with you about his father; I’m sure you guys will want to move on and meet up with him again. Is it true you never saw him yourself?”

“No, not yet. Can’t say I care much, but Gon really wants me to meet him.” Killua had to hold back a smile; of course Gon would want to do something so stupidly sentimental. “But it’s not like I have anything planned.”

“But aren’t you a Hunter?”

“Well, yeah…” Killua looked mildly bashful.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I never said I was!”

“Killua, I’m serious. People can go their whole lives not knowing what they want to do with the future; I have this nice job, but even I’m not sure it’s like my passion or anything.”

“I don’t know…I don’t want to have to search forever though.” Killua could have smacked himself; you probably thought he was some socially awkward bum making excuses for himself and tagging along with his buddy to have something to do.

“Well, does it have to be one thing? Just do what you want; you may not know exactly what it is yet, but until then, I’d just enjoy the ride.” You shrugged. “It’s beats worrying about it.”

“I’m not worrying.” Killua rolled his eyes.

“Oh, here we are. Thanks again, I felt a lot safer with you.” You gave him another thankful smile and took out your phone. “Can we exchange numbers? I’ll let you know my schedule.”

Killua’s phone nearly fell out of his hands as you took it from him and put in your own number and email address; it was bad enough thinking of what to say when he was by you, but through the phone? What if he sent something dumb by accident or sounded weird on the speaker or lost your number all together?

“Hey.”

You were halfway to your front door; Killua was still standing erect, head up and eyes locked with your own wide ones.

“You should be a pastry chef or something. You’re good at it…pastries.”

You blinked and felt the corners of your mouth quirk up without meaning them to.

“By the way, I never said those chocolates were for both you and Gon.”

“Huh? Wait, so they’re for just one of us?”

“Goodnight Killua, come by tomorrow night to walk me home!”

“Don’t just order me around!” Killua exclaimed as you gave him a quick wave and shut the door on
him. “Wait, what about the chocolates?!”

You giggled to yourself behind the closed door, peeking through the little curtain of the windowpane as Killua huffed and stomped away.

“What the heck was that about? Geez, I do her one favor and all of sudden she thinks I’ll just come when she calls? I don’t even want those stupid chocolates that much…”

Killua sighed heavily remembering your teasing grin and warm eyes as you listened to him patiently; right now all he wanted was to go back, bust down that door as easily as he knew he could and get some straight answers from you.

Just as he was convincing himself you weren’t worth the trouble, his phone buzzed in his pocket; Killua sighed heavily and looked at the text with the unfamiliar number.

“I really like you even if you’re a bit indecisive. See you tomorrow night! :3”

“I wasn’t-! She-I didn’t-argh!”

Killua wrote a quick ‘you’re welcome’ and briskly walked back to the apartment he and Gon were staying at. Once he was inside, Killua would simultaneously throw the retrieved wallet in Gon’s face while thanking him silently for his indirect assistance.

Not that he needed it.
You just barely held back from collapsing onto your stool when the last customer exited the shop.

“Thank you so much!” The girl waved with a wide smile as she carried away her small cake; she had ordered it with very specific instructions on decorating the other week. It had actually taken you a couple of batches of batter to get the cake just right, but when all was said and done, the shape was just right and the intricate roses and letters came out looking pretty realistic.

“Have a happy Valentine’s day!”

As soon as she was gone, you really did collapse in your stool.

“Oh my god…” You moaned as you felt the bottoms of your heels ache.

“Hey, at least it’s over.” Naota shrugged his broad and straining shoulders as he hauled a considerably heavy crate of pre ordered chocolate melts to the kitchen.

“I know, but I felt like it would never end.” You told your cashier; normally around closing time there was only enough business that warranted one person being in, but you needed Naota to man the register while you were busy with the sweets and packaging.

“You looked like you were having a lot of fun. I don’t know how you make those brownies so quickly.” Naota scratched the back of his head as he began putting away the extra, unused boxes. “By the way, what the hell was up with that kid trying to buy flowers?”

“He thought we sold actual flowers.”

“Why? Is he stupid or something?”

“No!” You giggled at Naota’s serious expression; you knew he was joking, at least partially. “He thought the sign said flowers, not candy flowers.”

“Geez, are you kidding me?” Naota shot you a wry smile. “I mean, it does say “The Cookie Jar” on our sign. What did he think we sold, tomatoes?”

“Roses.” You replied simply. “But I guess if tomatoes were the case we could have shown him some of those weird tomato shape cookies we still have….”

“Yeah, or shown him the door.”

“Naota!”

“Hey, we’re a business.” he shrugged, but a second later his smile was downright devilish; he grabbed the broom and began sweeping swiftly around the tables and chairs. “Is it too hard to toss your crap into the garbage? The can is right there, lazy bastards.”

“I honestly can’t tell whether you’re complaining or trying to be funny.”

“Can’t it be both? By the way, here.”

You smiled broadly as Naota tossed you a little baggie from the front pocket of his apron. “You shouldn’t have!”
“I didn’t!” Noata said cheerfully. “Found it on one of the benches earlier. Some loser is pissing off his date right about now.”

Your mouth fell open slightly. “Are you joking?”

“Yeah….well, no. But hey, you worked hard, take a break and have some cookies.”

“It’s not as fun eating ones I made that someone forgot to take home.” You opened the bag anyway to take a bite; Naota normally liked to take most of the leftovers home, so it was considerate in his own way to save you a treat. “I actually made you some candy, but maybe it would be more fair if I gave you that half eaten cake in the trash?”

“Oh, and I found this.”

Naota held out a card to you sideways, still sweeping with his free limb; he was actually doing the chores just as well with only one hand and it wasn’t unusual to see him sweeping with one hand and wiping down the tables with the other.

The card was pink with a bright red heart in the center; the thing that made you do a double take was that it was made out of construction paper.

“Did you make this yourself?” You took it gingerly.

“I was gonna write a message in macaroni, but I thought it might be a bit too tacky.”

You laughed as you opened the card; there was a puppy face made out of cut out hearts glued to the page.

“It was a bitch to make.” Naota smiled awkwardly as you gave him a look. “You know, ‘bitch”? It’s a dog pun…sorry.”

You closed the card and smiled. “I love it. You really didn’t have to make me this…”

“Don’t tell me what I have to do. My head kept saying, ‘hey stupid, make her a card.’ He’s the boss.”

“Naota, cut the jokes.” You rolled your eyes lightly.

“Okay, okay. Look, I really did want to make you something; you know I can’t cook, but I figured….I don’t know…maybe you’d think it was cute…” Naota’s pale cheeks blazed red.

“I do think it’s cute.” You held back a annoyed frown as the paper stuck to your slightly damp fingers. You wished you could wipe the sweat from your palms onto your pants, but Naota was now looking right at you, waiting expectantly.

“Naota…I should tell you now, I’m sort of talking to this other guy-”

“The grumpy kid who comes in with the slow kid?”

“Natoa, they are not-”

Naota raised an eyebrow as you paused and thought.

“Well…they’re our age…” You rubbed the back of your neck awkwardly. “But, yeah, I have been talking with him.”

“And?”
“Well, I like him.” You confessed feeling a tad guilty. “I like him a lot actually.”

“Why?” Naota’s mouth fell into a flat line.

“What?”

“He doesn’t seem like a bad guy, but every time he comes in here I usually see him smacking that other kid upside the head.” Naota remarked. “And besides, whenever he talks to you he gets so defensive and it’s like he can’t make up his mind whether or not he likes you.”

“No, Killua does like me.” You asserted. “He’s just a bit awkward and sure he can be kind of standoffish, but-”

“Come on, don’t get mad at me.” Naota said with considerable calm. “I’m not trying to dump on him or tell you what to do. But see this from my point of view...I really like you. Be honest, do you see us being more than coworkers?”

His bluntness on the subject made you blush. “Well...yeah. I do like you Naota….but-”

“Then let me be honest. I don’t think he’d have the first clue how to treat you if you were his girlfriend.” Naota confessed. “I think you deserve a guy who knows what he wants and I know without a shadow of a doubt I want to date you.”

“Naota, I like Killua; he’s not perfect, but he’s a good guy.” You sighed and handed him back the card. “I made him truffles for today, he’s going to walk me home.”

“He’s going to walk you home?”

You nodded at Naota’s dull expression. “Well, yes.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Oh come on!” Naota looked torn between smiling and his jaw dropping in shock. “He didn’t ask you out for a date on Valentine’s day? He likes you and he’s just going to walk you home?”

“So what?!” You rounded on him defensively. “There’s no big rush or anything; maybe he’s just being a gentleman, did you think of that?”

Naota just stared. “You don’t see anything weird about this?”

“Look, I’m already late to meet him-”

“He’s not even coming here?!” Naota balked. “If he’s such a gentleman, why doesn’t he come here?”

“He is going to get a surprise for me on his way.” You said in a haughty tone. “Anything else you want to pick at?”

“I’m not going to tell you what to do.” Naota sighed and took off his apron, hanging it with a shake of his head. “I just don’t get why you’re making me out like the bad guy; I’m just telling you how things look from my perspective. If I’m wrong, fine. Have fun on your sorta date thing.”

You watched Naota leave without another word, your mouth shut in a firm line and a pit in the bottom of your stomach. As you packed up and closed the doors, you had plenty of time to mull over
the conversation on your way to Killua.

“Well, maybe I was a little defensive, but Naota’s always picking at people. He doesn’t know a thing about Killua, it’s not fair for him to judge.”

But deep down you still felt some regret; you knew Naota was as nice as they came despite his teasing and blunt talk. On that note, you did have a sort of crush on him, and you really loved his sweet, homemade gift, but you also had feelings for Killua; hearing Naota voice some of your thoughts aloud didn’t help things.

“Am I fooling myself?” You wondered as you walked; the pit in your stomach was becoming hard and knocked around. “Maybe Killua doesn’t like me as much as I thought…he seems to, but then he acts all cold sometimes.” a sigh escaped your lips and you felt the weight of the baggie in your hands. “Some Valentine’s day. I blew off a guy who was really interested and I’m dancing around the topic with a guy who can’t seem to get his real feelings out in the open….”

“Hello, spacing out much?” Killua waved to you from the street corner.

“Oh Killua!” You raced over with an apologetic smile. “Sorry, work was crazy today.”

“I know.”

“I saved these for you though, made them myself.” You held the bag out and tried to fight away the memory of Naota’s disappointed face as he walked out of the shop. The card was burning a hole in the side pocket of your bag, but Killua’s sharp eyes were softening at the edges as he smiled and took the candy.

“Thanks. I got you this.” Killua handed you a wrapped chocolate bar with strange letters across the label. “It’s imported from the City of Aiai; they’re supposed to make their Valentine’s chocolates to perfection.”

“Oh wow!” You took them with a disbelieving smile. “How on earth did you get this?”

“I know people.” Killua might have been joking, you weren’t quite sure given his family’s reputation. “Probably not as sweet as yours though…”

“Thank you Killua.” You smiled warmly and carefully put away the bar. “This will be great to have before bed. I’m exhausted and a treat is just what I need.”

“I sort of got you something else though. Well, more like I did you a favor.”

“A favor?” Your head tilted in puzzlement as Killua gestured for you to follow him into the alley behind the general store. “What, you cleaned up the trash around here?”

“Not yet, but I will if you say so.” Killua pointed to a bag lying just beside the open dumpster; it was filled up with garbage and looked ready to burst.

“Killua, you lost me.” You scratched your head as you walked a bit closer to the bundle; a big plastic garbage bag filled with trash? What in the world was he thinking?

Without another word, Killua hardened his fingers and nails to slice up the top of the knot, causing all of the contents to fall out at your feet. Your lungs blew air into you enough to let out a piercing scream, but it just wouldn’t come out as Naota tumbled out of the plastic; his eyes were closed, and a trickle of blood dripped between his eyes. Killua reached down, still silent as a ghost, and rifled through the bottom of the bag. Muscle and bone stuck out of the stump on Naota’s severed arm and
it was seeing this that made you yell out in fear.

“Hey, calm down.” Killua scolded; he dropped the arm and covered your mouth, his free hand pointed at your throat. “You want people to come running over here? It was bad enough dealing with this guy, I’m too tired to kill anyone else.”

Your wide eyes stared at the wall blankly; he was complaining. It was as if this whole ordeal was a chore. Killua’s hand came down from your mouth as you grew numb in his arms.

“Well, he’s not dead. Yet anyway; I saw him bugging you earlier, so let me know if you want this pest taken care of.”

Killua’s previous statement rang in your head.

“I can take care of anyone who would try to mess with you.”

“No. No, don’t kill him!” You didn’t dare risk raising your voice too loud despite your panic; you gulped and took a closer look at the unconscious body. Killua had wrapped up Naota’s arm clumsily, temporarily stifling the blood flow. Who knew when he would die at this rate.

“Seriously? He’s probably just gonna keep bugging you; I don’t normally go easy on people you know.” Killua kicked at the body. “You should be thanking me, he’s probably the type to stalk women who reject him, he sure wasn’t taking it well earlier.”

“You’re crazy!” You struggled to break free from his iron grip. “What the hell is wrong with you? Why the hell would you think I would want this?!”

Killua’s gaze was ice. “I just helped you out. This loser doesn’t know when to take a hint; he was trying to talk shit about me to you, manipulate you into thinking I was some jerk. Like I didn’t like you or something…”

You slammed the back of your head into Killua’s chin, but all he did was let out a muffled groan and a curse.

“Naota was trying to help me, he didn’t deserve this! Call an ambulance, he’s going to-!”

“He was trying to turn you against me!”

You sobbed and jerked your body violently from side to side, desperate to escape; Killua barely seemed to even be effected. You felt your stomach churn every time you caught sight of the arm.

“Naota…” you whimpered and gasped; you were even more exhausted and your body was feeling number by the second from Killua’s tight hold. “Naota, I’m sorry…”

“Shut up! Don’t be so stupid, he doesn’t care about you half as much as I-” Killua growled unintelligibly and began dragging you away. “We’re getting out of here. Who cares what happens to this idiot?!”

“He’s my friend!”

“You don’t need friends!”

Killua’s glare faltered as he stared at your tear filled eyes; your hair and clothes were in disarray from the struggling. His nails were practically cutting your arms.

“I’m not like him.”
Your eyes went involuntarily to where Naota still lay unconscious in the bag, his body half on the dirty cement; you could have sworn he had moved.

“I’m nothing like him. This isn’t—it’s for her. It’s for her own good!”

Killua shut his eyes tight to the accusing voice in his own mind. He was selfish. Illumi was right. He couldn’t do anything without hurting someone he cared about. He was bred for this.

He was a natural killer.

“Please. Killua, let me go.” You pleaded softly as you saw his troubled, glazed over eyes; maybe the reality of the situation was dawning on him. Maybe there was hope.

“Why…?”

You flinched and withheld a shriek as Killua dropped you on the cold ground unceremoniously; he chuckled hollowly to himself, not meeting your petrified stare anymore.

“Why can’t I just be normal?”

You froze and held your breath as he turned his back to you; Killua could sense your fear from a mile away.

“She’s afraid of me….how did I let this happen? Why couldn’t I just…?” Killua clenched his teeth, chest burning with hate as he heard Naota let out a soft moan. There was a sound of shuffling just behind him; no doubt you had gone to help the half dead man. “I just want him to disappear. If he wasn’t here, none of this would have happened! She’d still….she’s still like me…”

But even this was a lie; the truth was always bound to surface. Killua looked behind his shoulder; you were pressing your outer shirt to Naota’s stump, but the blood was still coming out fast.

“I’ll call an ambulance.” You told him with a trembling whisper. “It’ll be okay….I’m sorry, you’ll be okay, I swear-”

“Bye then.” Killua sneered and disappeared seemingly into thin air.

As you helped Naota into the wailing ambulance and held his still attached hand, the last thing on your mind was Killua’s whereabouts.

When the months passed and you helped Naota become adjusted to his prosthetic arm (not that he had much issue using his one, as he cheekily reminded you despite his weak voice. He was much quieter nowadays) you barely gave a thought to what had ever happened to what now seemed like a misguided, silly crush. You figured he was off in some other country, living the life he had chosen, and you were only a memory to him now. That being said, you never did go out for your walk home without looking all about you every few minutes, half expecting that shock of white hair and sharp eyes to capture yours once again.

“Killua? Can’t we at least say goodbye?” Gon had asked the day they had left town; from Killua’s behavior, it was clear you and he had some sort of falling out.

He didn’t pry for details, but even he could sense how heavily it weighed on his best friend’s mind; still, even a farewell was absolutely out of the question and any time Gon so much as mentioned you or the shop, Killua looked ready to either run away or hit something.
But despite the hate Killua seemed to be holding inside for whatever had happened, there were a few mornings where Gon chose to ignore the wet spots on Killua’s pillow or pretend the redness just tinging his eyes in the mornings wasn’t there.

“I already said goodbye.”
You struggled to carry the pot of stew by its frail handles. “Luca, when the hell are you going to get us new equipment? One of these days this pot is going to break and that’s five gallons of soup wasted.”

“I’ve had that pot for twenty years; just tighten the screws.” he said carelessly as he handed out trays. “Here you go sweetie.”

“Thank you.” The young woman muttered; her eyes seemed a bit vacant as she went on to the next line, tray and bread roll clutched in her hands; you had seen her visit the soup kitchen every day that week. Another regular.

“Anyway,” Luca continued as he refilled the bread basket with fresh rolls. “This pot has another twenty years of use coming; with the money it takes to get a new one, think of all the food we can buy.”

“You and your excuses for keeping junk.” You rolled your eyes as you set the pot down carefully on the next table; it wasn’t even the only one in use, but it was the biggest, perfect for cooking large amounts. The estimated population of Meteor City was eight to ten million; shelters and pantries were located throughout the districts, and your’s was one of the many. At least a few hundred came through every day for a hot meal and directions to the nearest homeless shelter or rehabilitation facility. Luca would half jokingly say most were probably going to need directions to the nearest makeshift jail house; you remedied his attitude with a whap to the head with your favorite serving spoon.

“Not that he’s wrong. This place isn’t exactly the pinnacle of crime free.” You thought ruefully as you began cutting up vegetables in the back for a new pot; locals who grew their own food and had a bit more to spare would often donate their produce at dirt cheap prices. It was just one of the many ways the city’s inhabitants showed their sense of community.

That being said, an unregistered city uninvolved with the world government was just the place for petty crimes. Violent crime wasn’t quite rampant in the city; thieving, hustling, illegal substance dealing, and all manners of illegal trade sure, but direct harm to the someone by another was rare. The best thing you could say about living here was that people took care of their own and looked out for one another; if they were citizens of the city. The logic was if the rest of the world abandoned them, why should they care about anyone’s well being outside of the city limits?

“Excuse me?”

You frowned; the young woman from before was standing behind you.

“Sorry, but you’re not allowed to be back here, health code and all that.”

“Oh. I was wondering if I could have another piece of bread?”

You surveyed the woman; slight build, neat clothes, but the strangest vacant look in her eyes. It crossed your mind she was a bit simple in the head, maybe a bit socially awkward; most people here weren’t the most well adjusted.

She adjusted her glasses and blinked. “Would that be okay?”

“Well...alright, but just this once. We have to ration our daily supply.” You smiled kindly and held
out a fresh baked roll and she took it gingerly.

“Much appreciated. See you soon.”

The woman was gone and out of the building before you could say another word.

“Huh...maybe it’s for a family member?” You wondered and went back to your chopped celery.

Meanwhile, Shizuku held out the warm roll to Blinky who licked his lips; she didn’t want to risk blowing her cover, but she thought maybe Blinky might enjoy a piece.

“Here you go. We should report to the boss now.” Shizuku tossed the roll into the sentient vacuum’s waiting maw. “Hm...where were we meeting again?”

An Hour Later:

“About time.” Feitan sighed as Shizuku arrived; she was looking around, as if double checking she was in the right place.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. So what did you learn?”

As usual, Chrollo was seated above them, yet his demeanor was placid and casual as he waved Shizuku closer. “Did you find out their method of financing?”

“No, but over the course of the week I saw men and women come to drop off supplies.” Shizuku put a finger to her lips thoughtfully. “But I’m certain they were just regular people. They gave her food and extra blankets to hand out.”

“But no money huh?” Nobunaga asked from his place; he polished the hilt of his sword with care, almost as if he weren’t paying attention, but they knew better.

“No.”

“What about the cost for the building? Do they own it?” Franklin inquired. “They could be getting the money to pay for it in secret.”

Shalnark shook his head. “Nah, I looked into that; they own it, but the money came from that woman’s account. She inherited it when her father passed away a year ago and most of it went to building an extension and kitchen equipment too. As far as I can see, they’re not getting help from any outside people.”

“If that’s the case, should we still approach them?” Machi wondered with little emotion, but she glanced at Chrollo briefly. “Their dealings aren’t with anyone outside the city.”

“I don’t see why we’re wasting time with spying. Why not take a more direct route to get our answers faster?” Feitan suggested.

“It won’t be necessary.”

Everyone in the room seemed to snap to attention as Chrollo closed his book and stood up from his spot.

“If we barge in there and cause a scene, that won’t look good for us, would it?”
The reason for this surveillance was simple; Meteor City was their home. No outside influences were allowed to be involved in internal affairs, not while they were there; the majority of the city’s public didn’t even want outsiders help. If this soup kitchen was getting backed from some syndicate of group outside of the city, they would need to be closed down. Or at the least put under new management. Still, the Phantom Troupe was supposed to be an organization to be looked to as protectors of their home; it wouldn’t look good if they took extreme measures on what was a charitable food pantry.

“I think I can handle this myself.”

The Next Day:

“Excuse me, are you the owner?”

“Yes. Who are you?” You had just finished cleaning the last table and felt a bit irritated at the moment; typically early bird visitors were common, but not this early. It was at least two hours before you were meant to open; Luca wouldn’t even be awake at this time.

“Chrollo Lucifer.”

You dropped the baskets you had just collected from the cabinets; Chrollo reached down to pick up the one that rolled over to his foot.

“I...I’m sorry-”

“There’s no need to be frightened. I know it’s early, but I thought you might appreciate my visit being timed before others arrived.”

Chrollo held out the basket to you and you took it, shivering as his cold fingertips brushed against yours accidentally.

“Thanks.” You said, keeping your eyes cast down slightly as you quickly took the basket and gathered the rest still strewn around your feet.

“The head spider....he’s here.” You bent down to the ground to buy yourself a little time to think. “Why?”

The Phantom Troupe may have been well known, but you yourself had never even seen one of the members; their ruthlessness was notorious and in most cases lethal. They had qualms and were against harming residents, but you were sure they had little guilt over dispatching people who they saw as stepping out of bounds. The question was why their leader was there; what had you done to warrant a surprise visit? And if his intentions were to use physical force, what chance did you have of survival?

“This is a nonprofit kitchen, yes?”

“I-uh, yes.” You nodded and stood up straight; the bottom of your already unevenly hemmed skirt swept across the dirty floor as you rose, making you wished you had worn something a little more presentable. He was intimidating and you felt small under his probing stare. Chrollo wore a professional and yet simple and impeccably clean suit; a small book was tucked under one arm.

“How do you find the funding to feed so many each day?”

You held the baskets to your chest in an unconsciously protective gesture. “Most of the supplies we get are from local markets. Meat close to the expiration date is delivered by the market owner down
the street; produce comes from neighbors who grow their own or farmers near the borders. Some people give canned food. Almost all our pots and pans are donated…nearly every day I drive out to get supplies from the wealthier donors; they give us things for some of our patrons....”

“Is that so?” Chrollo asked with a seemingly interested tone. “And you come in every day to work?”

“Yes. I have some staff on hand and a few volunteers who come in regularly…”

“You’re a busy woman. Generous too.”

You couldn’t find a reply; you just stared as he sat down in one of the grimey fold up chairs.

“Meteor City has it’s share of destitute, people willing to do anything for a bit of spare food or money. Since we have no official government resources, I’d say the need for them is even more dire, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes…” You nodded, wondering if he usually asked so many questions of others. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t understand. Why are you here?”

“I still have some questions.” Chrollo said. “I sympathize with your desire to help, but you must also know I and my fellow spiders wish to keep things in the community, so to speak.”

“I-I don’t get any money from any other sources.”

“So it would seem. But how do you manage to look over this place full time, practically around the clock, without a means of income? Not to mention I assume you pay your staff wages.”

“I do. I used most of my inheritance on this place and the rest I use to live on. I have a room upstairs and I eat what we make here. I don’t have many expenses outside that need to be managed.” you explained; the sooner Chrollo understood the sooner he might leave you be.

“I see. Well, thank you for your service.” Chrollo held out his hand for you to shake. “I hope I didn’t disturb you.”

“No, it’s alright.” You smiled and shook his own firmly. “Was there anything else you needed to know?”

This all felt so similar to having an interview with your landlord; even the city’s own self appointed officials weren’t this thorough or nosey when you requested a permit to serve food. To his credit, Chrollo seemed very professional and courteous; regardless of the probing questions, he had never once broke from his kind, placid tone. You really hadn’t expected the leader of “the most horrible group of criminals in all history” to be borderline soft spoken. His gray eyes connected with your own in what may have been a gesture of comfort and respect, though you couldn’t help feeling intimidated.

They were just so…cold. Staring into them was liked having a bucket of freezing water slowly poured over your head and the goosebumps on your arms were clearly visible. The knowing quirk of his lips made you wonder if he knew the exact effect he was having on you.

“Are you always this nervous?”

You let go of his hand and he chuckled good naturedly as though you had just made some amusing, witty remark.

“Well, I’ll be taking my leave then.”
“I,” You began just as he was going to turn to the door; he halted and gazed at you curiously.

“Yes?”

“I don’t understand. Why not accept outside help?”

Chrollo cocked his head. “Are you saying you want to reach out the people outside of our city?”

“It’s not necessary...but what if it was? We only have so many resources; what does it matter as long as the people here get what they need? Some people may even think the rest of the world owes us something for abandoning us.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Chrollo replied. “‘We reject no one, so take nothing from us.’ Fitting, wouldn’t you think? The city is sustainable despite serving as this world’s dumping ground; the people the rest of the world consider trash, or know nothing of, are able to rise and flourish.”

"Flourish?" Your eyes narrowed in disbelief.

“Yes.” his tone became gently firm. “My group alone has given so much to our fellow citizens. The Spiders forged their own way without any outside assistance; people here have moved and explored the outside world, strong and willful, without the assistance of the world government or influences. Just because we were left behind, doesn’t mean we’re helpless. We stand together as a community, no matter where we go or who we meet. I’m sure you’ve seen it in the way your neighbors assist you?”

“Yes. But I don’t see how purposely shutting out others is benefitting us. Why keep this place disconnected? Why not share the benefits other cities have if we needed to?” You said carefully, but your skepticism eas evident. “Are you saying if this city were crumbling to the ground, you would just watch it fall as long as it meant we were ‘independent’?”

Chrollo regarded you with a keen eye. “You’re so assertive all of a sudden. I can tell you’re passionate about the welfare of the people who live here; make sure to contain that to an appropriate level. I’ll only say this once.”

He took a step forward and you took one back; his eyes were hard as flint.

“It would be a shame if something were to hinder your progress here.”

You opened your mouth but closed it just as quickly; you knew a warning when you heard one. Chrollo smiled benignly and nodded.

“Then have a good day.”
A few days later, you woke up to begin the day and found three bags full of food on your doorstep along with several packages.

“My god…” You breathed as you opened the first one; it was made of sack cloth and filled to the brim with potatoes. The next bag was filled with plastic bags of assorted greens; lettuce, spinach, artichokes, peppers, celery, green onions, and more. The third bag had bread rolls, made not too long ago from the feel of them. They weren’t nearly ready to go stale and you wondered if whoever had left them had delivered them right after the bread had cooled.

Then there were the paper packages, wrapped up tight and cold to the touch; these had meat inside. Sausages, pork chops, lamb chops, a couple hams, strips of beef, chicken parts, and steaks bigger than one of your hands.

“Okay, I know this is gonna sound selfish, but do you think I could have just one of those steaks?” Luca had asked with folded hands. “I swear I’ll work overtime if you want, but I’ve never seen a cut so...fresh!”

“Sure, take a few. I could barely fit it all in the freezer box.” You marveled at the feast you and Luca, who you had called in just a few minutes after hauling it all inside, had prepared for your patrons. The stew smelled heavenly, the tender beef cooked to perfection with the chopped and minced veggies until there was more solids in the broth then there ever had been; you had fried the pork chops and lamb chops and mixed them with seasoned white rice for an extra hearty dish to serve. The baskets bulged with bread and there was hardly any room on the serving tables for it all.

“How the hell did this happen?” Luca blew a breath in slight worry; he looked ready to pass out from happy shock earlier, but as the morning went on and the food was being distributed, it seemed a sinking feeling developed in his considerable gut. “This can’t be from our usual donations.”

“I don’t know.” You smiled a bit; a family of six was staring with wide eyed wonder at the spread, their jaws practically hanging to the floor. This was the reaction of pretty much every person who came in that day. Many of them asked if the food would always be like this, but you could only say that a wealthy benefactor had donated from the goodness of their heart. Even so, the food would be able to last for a few months if rationed carefully.

“Sweetie, I hate to be the skeptic, but maybe…” Luca ran a hand over his grubby beard, a strange look in his eyes as he stirred the last pot of stew for the day with somewhat absent care.

“What’s wrong?” You asked; Luca was normally the carefree one between the two of you.

“I just got to thinking...maybe we shouldn’t have taken this food in.”

“What?! Why, we’re going to be set for a long time; we can save up money to get better supplies, maybe a few more pots.” You added teasingly, but Luca’s eyes remained solemn.

“I would like to think some rich guy dropped these off out of the goodness of their heart. You know I’d like to.” Luca stopped stirring to look you in the eye. “But you seem a bit off today; I’m guessing you might be wondering if this donation is too good to be true.”

You paused cleaning the potatoes, though they hardly needed to be scrubbed. “I won’t pretend this isn’t odd...but there’s no proof it’s anything bad. What’s the worst that can happen?”
“Whoever gave us all this thinks we owe them now.”

You stared at Luca’s grim face; he had been working for you longer than anyone else. Like many residents in the poorer areas of Meteor City, he came from humble beginnings. Not to mention his share of experiences in the streets, alone, no money, and desperate. He fell in with a bad group and spent a few years behind bars; no he was on the straight and narrow, wanting to give back to the community, but he was as sharp as could be. If he sensed danger or was wary, you trusted his judgement.

“Maybe…but there wasn’t a note or anything.” You contemplated. “No one was there. Why would they just drop off the food and leave if they expected something in return? Why not just confront me directly, or at least leave a note, something…?”

“Maybe the wanted you to take the bait and hold it as a reason to extort you.” Luca suggested. “I don’t think whoever left this stuff wants to hurt anyone, at least for now; the food is fresh, clean, no one’s gotten sick from eating it. Maybe I’m being paranoid, but I think it’d be best if we kept our eyes peeled.”

“What if-?”

You cut yourself off; you hadn’t said a thing to Luca about the Phantom Troupe. As much as they were feared, Luca still looked down on them; yes, he would never pick a fight with any of them, but that didn’t mean he didn’t get a grim look of disapproval when the were mentioned.

A thief is a thief, he would say, no matter how strong or how nice the things they pinched; a bunch of thugs who stole and killed for no good reason is what they were to him, and those kind of people were not wanted, he didn’t care if they were from the same city. If Luca had known their leader was in there asking questions and butting in, he might do something rash; you didn’t plan on telling him anytime soon.

“If?”

“Well, at the risk of sounding idealistic, what if someone from a wealthier district decided to reach out? They might have done it to ease their own conscious, give themselves a pat on the back, but if it got us this food…” you shrugged nonchalantly. “But you’re right. I’ll keep an eye out too.”

That night, you went up into the second level you lived in; there was a bedroom, a bathroom, and a small kitchen that was right next to a smaller living room, the tile floor and the gray carpet was separated by a carpet transition strip. You usually ate on the couch in front of the TV; it was a comfortable place for one person. You wished you were more at ease to relax at the end of such a busy day.

“Let’s think rationally…why would he donate all that food? What is there for him to gain….?”

Then again, the Phantom Troupe was known for occasional philanthropic work; perhaps this would give them a better public image. The more Meteor City considered them allies, the easier a time they would have going about their business; they were already afforded protection in the form of their powers, but legal and political approval was something that provided a whole other set of benefits.

“Maybe. But if that’s the case, why didn’t he tell me? Or why didn’t he insist on becoming a benefactor before he left? If he wanted to improve their reputation in the city, why deliver it secretly?” You sat down on the couch; you had taken some of the food to your own kitchen, not just out of wanting the food, but otherwise the freezer and the refrigerator downstairs wouldn’t even be able to hold all the meat.
“Wow...these look better than the freshest stuff from the market…” You stared in awe at the still steaming cut of steak, mashed potatoes, and salad you had prepared; your chipped plate looked even smaller than usual. “I feel a bit bad taking it but...a treat once in awhile is okay right?”

“Do you always talk to yourself?”

The politely curious tone was at odds with the man who had somehow broken into the top level of your building; he was standing at the threshold of the front door, smiling a tad bemused. Your eyes went to the tattoo on his forehead before making contact with his eyes.

“Forgive me for coming in so suddenly, but I thought you might be too busy during the day to speak with me.” Chrollo wiped his feet on the ragged mat. “Should I close the door?”

You nodded dumbly and he shut it carefully.

“And you didn’t answer my question.”

You blinked, your head slowly clearing from the shock. “I...I don’t mean to. It’s just sort of a habit… why-?”

“As I said, I came here to speak with you.” Chrollo looked at your forgotten plate. “That looks good; do you always cook yourself?”

“Yes...I,” Your head was swimming and you rose stiffly. “I can fix you a plate. Have you had dinner?”

“What the heck is wrong with me?”

You finished serving him as he sat on the other end of your dingy couch.

“May I have a glass of water?”

“Sure.”

Chrollo watched you; even in shock, you moved with practiced ease. ‘Graceful’ might have been the word to describe it best if you were doing something more refined.

“Thank you.” Chrollo nodded to you and began to cut his steak, the knife and fork clinking softly in the otherwise silent room. “I hope you were able to store all the food. I’m afraid I didn’t think of whether you would have the available space ahead of time.”

“I found the room.” You replied as you sat next to him, slowly settling in, as if to not startle him. Or perhaps you were afraid of getting startled by any sudden motions from him. “Mr. Lucifler, why did you give us this food?”

“It was easy to acquire.”

“He stole it…” You didn’t dare say your thoughts aloud though. “I mean, but why?”

“Why not?”

You thought about it. “Most people don’t give people things without expecting something in return.”

“You’re quite right.” Chrollo smiled as if you had told a joke; he ate slowly, seeming to savor each bite, but his face was impassive. You got the feeling food wasn’t much to him; he could be eating anything at all and he wouldn’t care how good it was, as long as he had the necessary nutrients.
“I find you interesting.”

You chanced a look in his direction as he set down his utensils. “So you gave me food?”

“‘You were terrified of me. You looked ready to run away once you heard who I was; even so…” Chrollo looked contemplative, his light smile falling. “You challenged me, argued all the while shaking in your boots. You have nothing; no powers, no connections, nothing to intimidate me, but you couldn’t keep your mouth shut, even as I was about to leave you be.”

“I really don’t understand. What do you want?”

“To speak with you.” Chrollo repeated.

“But the food—”

“I felt like giving it to you. We had stolen some for ourselves and there was much leftover.”

So it was on a whim he decided to help you out, but then again, the fact you were on his mind was disconcerting. He seemed to like that you had spoken up; perhaps he was a man who valued inner strength. Flattering, but worrying.

“Mr. Lucilfer, what did you want to talk about?”

“Do you feel this city is owed recognition? Do you feel it’s justified if we receive assistance from outside sources?” Chrollo’s voice held no contempt or portrayed that he was looking down on you; he just seemed curious.

“Not really.” You answered slowly. “I believe the people who put this city off the map should be the ones responsible for any of the negative repercussions. But most of the world doesn’t even know we exist; this place is off the grid.”

You chewed a piece of your steak thoughtfully. “If somebody from the outside came to me for help, I’d give it to them.”

“A true philanthropist.”

“I guess.” You shrugged. “When my dad died, I thought about how he always wanted more for me than what he had growing up.”

“Every generation wants the next to improve.”

“He wanted me to live without ever wanting anything; but I’m fine with how things are as long as I have the essentials.” You looked down at your lap. “I don’t have much strength or any connections; all I have is myself. I want to give back to this city.”

“A soup kitchen can only benefit so many; it’s more of a bandaid on the issues of poverty. There’s a proverb that says, ‘If charity cost nothing, the world would be full of philanthropists’.” Chrollo recalled with ease, closing his eyes as if in concentration. “Do you know what that means?”

“People would give if they could all afford to.” You replied. “Maybe not though.”

“That’s unexpectedly cynical.”

“Some people don’t want to lose anything they have or they’ll give grudgingly for social approval.” You sighed. “You know, I always liked this one quote: ‘Charity begins at home, but should not end there.’ I think people born into unloving and selfish homes wouldn’t think much of giving to others
Chrollo opened his eyes slowly. “Tell me something. Do you believe humans are born good or bad?”

“I wouldn’t say bad...but I think kindness is learned; I think every person has the potential, but how they grow and learn can affect it in a negative or positive way. Good qualities can get squashed down by living in a cruel world.”

“Do we live in a cruel world?”

You smiled almost sadly. “Sometimes. But the bad things that happen to people...they may not happen for any real reason, but they can be. A person who suffered can turn that into the will to save others from pain or to cause it. It depends on the person in the end.”

Chrollo regarded you. “Have you turned your grief over your father’s death into this? This place to ease the suffering of others with the basic necessities?”

You felt a lump in your throat and avoided his stare. “That’s definitely part of it...you’re as smart as they say.”

“They?”

“People. Rumors.” You said with some hesitance. “I’ve heard you’re intelligent….it’s how you can do so much as the leader of,” you took the empty plates to the kitchen, your nerves making you feel jumpy; maybe you had said too much? The last thing you wanted was to offend him. “Do you want anything else Mr. Lucilfer?”

“Yes.”

The air in the room was thick with tension as he stepped forward, his arm reaching to place the forgotten utensils on the sink rim. He pulled it back and his sleeve brushed against your shoulder; you could feel his breath lightly on your neck.

“We’re relatively the same age; call me by my given name next time I stop by.”

You didn’t breathe for a minute and you didn’t move for ten more after you heard him move away and the front door open and close behind you.
“Hey, are you dating anyone?”

“Shoot!” The tray of bread rolls fell from your hands as you were transferring them to the counter. “You gotta be kidding...I just made these.”

“Five second rule.”

“I am not giving those people bread that was on this floor; who knows where your feet have been.” You gave Luca a look as you retrieved the rolls. “We do have standards we have to go by to serve food here you know.”

“Alright, alright. So?”

“What?”

“You been walking around this place for weeks now with this weird distracted look; you forgot to turn off the stove three times after the kitchen closed just this week.” Luca didn’t bother looking over at you as he skinned the potatoes; he did this neat trick where the peel came off in a spiral. “You just look like your minds not here; I may be wrong, but it sounds like you’ve got someone on your mind.”

“Oh I didn’t realize.” You said with a brief chuckle. “No, it’s not that. I guess I’m just tired.”

Luca stopped what he was doing to give you a long look.

“What?”

“You do look tired….you know, with all the food we got from the last donation, why don’t you take some time off?”

As months passed, bags of food were being dropped off at least every two weeks; they mostly were full of the same sort of food, choice cuts of meat and vegetables along with the bread, but there was also medium sized barrels with ripe fruits or even blankets, gloves, hats, coats, boots, and even things like medicine and first aid kits you kept on hand for those coming in sick.

That wasn’t even counting the special deliveries.

“A vacation? I can’t do that.” You shook your head.

“Sure you can. We’ve saved a lot of money and time from this mystery donor.” Luca waved an arm around the kitchen; there was another oven with a four burners currently making stew and a pot roast, and a second freezer was holding the rest of the meat. The appliances had somehow been wheeled into the kitchen overnight a week ago. You didn’t bother telling Luca that the ‘mystery donor’ had basically broken in to deliver it.

“I don’t know...I do most of the cooking here.”

“So? Let someone else handle it.” Luca said loudly as though daring any of the other volunteers to staff to say otherwise, but no one even looked away from their duties. “Heck, why not use some of
that inheritance left over—"

You looked away for a moment and frowned sadly; the thought of using the money to treat yourself made your chest ache.

“I’m sorry.” Luca came over and put his two scarred hands on your shoulders; you weren’t sure how many were from brawls or kitchen accidents. “I know you don’t care about the money, not for that. But your old man wouldn’t have wanted you to overwork yourself. Just a week or so, take off and relax. You know, there’s advantages to not having ID.”

“What do you mean?” Your brief sadness faded to confusion at Luca’s grin.

“No passport necessary. Why not get out of the city? Take a train, a rental car, whatever; a change of scene may clear your head.”

“Oh no!” You said in disbelief. “I mean come on, I’ve never been out of this part of the city, let alone…”

Luca clapped you on the back. “Well, there’s no better time to start!”

You sighed and went back to the rolls; not many people even bothered to think about leaving the city. You yourself were never all that curious of the outside world, especially not when your father had his heart attack or when you began scraping together the beginnings of the soup kitchen to dedicate to his memory.

Chrollo told you of many places when he came to visit; he would usually stop by at dinner, eat a meal of the food he had provided, and left within an hour or so. Usually he would ask you questions; he had no shame asking you personal things or bringing up controversial topics.

But on some days, he would tell you stories of places he and his gang had visited. He left out details of why of course, and he never spoke of his time before the Phantom Troupe; you thought it a bit hypocritical. He seemed to be steadily gaining all sorts of information about you, but you barely knew a thing about him.

You were in deep thought concerning the possibility of travel when as you walked up the stairs to your floor; right in front of your door, there was a wrapped box. Unlike the paper covered meats or the wooden crates or sacks of vegetables, your...gifts were usually wrapped in simple decorative paper. Now and then, there was even a bow.

The wrapping paper was your favorite color; you went inside and as you came to expect by now, Chrollo was lounging on your couch, legs crossed almost primly and somewhat slouched as he read; he never seemed to come without this little old book, but usually he also brought another to share with you. You would play attentive audience as he read his favorite passages to you. The he would discuss them; it was like you had joined a book club.

“Oh you’re back early.” Chrollo said absently. “Open the box.”

You did so; inside was a candle.

“It’s sandalwood.” Chrollo said as you sniffed it. “You seem quite harried as of late; this scent is supposed to be relaxing.”

“Thank you.”

The personal donations were always something along those lines; now and then, you received
something odd, like a jeweled pin, a golden fountain pen, what you assumed was a startling red glass
eye that shone like a ruby. You suspected all if not some of these tokens were procured illegally.

“Sit.”

“I still have to make dinner.”

Chrollo nodded. “In that case, perhaps you could just listen?”

You nodded. “I was going to make roasted chicken.”

“Whatever you want is fine.” Chrollo said as he thumbed through a new book; perhaps new wasn’t
the right word. It looked very old, the spine bent from being opened up and closed. The pages were
all crisp though; Chrollo never dog-earred a corner to save his place. In all likelihood, he didn’t need
to.

“Alright.” You took out two pans and a pack of thawed chicken thighs; you seasoned them lightly
and rubbed the skin with garlic as Chrollo spoke softly in his almost soothing voice.

“Love and death are two uninvited guests, when they come, no one knows, but they do the same
work: one takes the heart and the other takes it’s beat.”

“Huh.” You commented vaguely as you waited for the chicken to cook; you began working on a
simple salad as Chrollo became lost in his musings. He often would begin to speak aloud, then trail
off and become immersed in his own thoughts.

“Did you love your father?”

You looked over at him; Chrollo wasn’t facing you, but you could tell he was waiting for you to
respond.

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“How? Well...it’s not that easy to explain.” You said softly. “I guess I never realized how much I
really loved him once he was gone. Little things he used to do or say, even things that were kind of
annoying. Memories; those are the things I miss a lot.”

“Would you say you love him more now?”

“Not exactly...it’s like I have more of an appreciation. And I wish...I guess there’s a lot of things I
wish I could have said to him. Things we never did together…”

Like traveling; your father had also never stepped foot outside the city.

“It’s funny what love and death can make you realize…” You said almost to yourself as you felt
tears well up in your eyes; ever since your father’s passing, you became more and more aware that
you yourself would not live forever. It was one of the reasons you started the food pantry; you
wanted to do something to give your life meaning. You wanted to share what you had, to make
another’s life just a little bit easier; maybe it wasn’t much, but it was fulfilling. Y

“Maybe Luca’s right...while I have the chance, why not see a bit of the world for myself?” You
smiled and felt your tears cease as you returned to tossing the salad greens; you felt so light the more
you thought of it. Maybe you could visit Yorknew city, see islands, even go on an airplane. You
beamed and felt your chest clench from giddiness. “Why not?”

“I suppose so.”

Chrollo’s low voice snapped you from your thoughts; he was standing up and walking over to you with an unreadable expression.

“I have something I don’t want to keep you in the dark about; you’re not a member of the Spiders, so I can give you all the details. You must not tell this to anyone else though.”

“I won’t” You wouldn’t dare.

“I’m not able to use my nen. It’s been taken away from me; I will have to leave here shortly, yet...I find it hard to do so.”

“His powers are gone? Does this mean-?”

“I have never feared my death; the only thing I truly care about is the Phantom Troupe name con timing. But it seems I have some time; I couldn’t help think of you, of speaking with you, learning about you. It brought me some measure of amusement and...it was unpleasant to think of all the things I still wanted to discuss with you.” Chrollo found himself chuckling softly. “I suppose I should cut to the chase. What I want to say is that I want you to come with me.”

Your mouth fell slightly and you let go of the spoon you were using; you could faintly smell the chicken beginning to burn and hear the skin crackling in the oven, but this meant nothing to you at the moment. Chrollo stood at his full height, looking down at you with a mildly fond gaze.

“I will keep supplying your pantry with food and supplies; I’ve given the other members orders to do so, as to not tempt you to seek outside resources.”

“Wait, what?! You exclaimed. “Then why-why are you telling me this? Why do i have to go with you?”

“I’m requesting you come.” Chrollo’s gentle smile was gone and replaced with a thin line, the corners of his lips pulled down just so. “Didn’t you want to see the world?”

“I never said-!”

“I heard you earlier, speaking with that man. I took the liberty of installing surveillance equipment and miniature speakers for a measure of security.”

“I never heard anything about it.” You shot back venomously. “And since this is a request, I’ll have to say no thank you.”

Chrollo wasn’t fazed, at least not on the outside. “Why?”

“Why?! You’re insane! I’ve spent months worrying you would kill me, you’re nothing but a thief, a murderer! I don’t want this-” you took the candle off the counter and threw it on the tile floor, cracking the wax right down the middle. “I don’t want any of these stupid, stolen things!”

Chrollo was deathly silent as you continued, your arms waving almost comically if it weren’t for the sharp cracking of your clearly upset tone and your tear filled eyes. Months spent on the edge walking over eggshells and monitoring everything you said and did in his presence were finally catching up with you.
“I’m exhausted. I don’t know why you keep coming here…” you held back an angry hoarse cry as he only stared blankly; maybe it was knowing his own power had been taken that gave you the push you needed to let out your anger and fear. You hated him; he was intelligent and charming and cold and cruel and sick in the head.

“Because I enjoy your company.”

“I don’t even want you in my house! I just want you to leave me alone, take the food, take the presents, just go!” You were a second away from either begging or pushing him out; your eyes were stinging now and you grabbed the wooden spoon to brandish. “I hate this...I want you to go!”

“What about your soup kitchen?”

“What about it??”

“I think you’ve underestimated me. That was a mistake.”

You were disarmed in the blink of an eye; your chin was being held in a bruising grip.

“I won’t just take what I’ve so generously given you. I will take everything.” Chrollo forced you to look him in the eyes while he tucked a strand of hair behind your ear with a feather light touch. “The people who’ve helped you in the past will not be offering their service to you anymore.”

He paused and lowered his face to yours.

“What a hateful look. Do you despise me that much? And here I thought we were becoming well acquainted with each other.”

“How could you? You’d be willing to let people starve just to get what you want?!”

“There are other soup kitchens; besides, the people who come to you have many other problems aside from hunger. Chances are, they won’t last long, even with your help; but still, do you really wish to take away such a reliable resource for them? Do you want to squander your father’s hard work?”

The tears dripped down your chin and onto his hand, but he paid them no mind as his cold eyes met your broken stare.

“Didn’t you want a vacation? Just contact your employee, tell him your plans, and we’ll be gone in the morning.” Chrollo said with the utmost patience. “I will make sure your staff’s wages are paid, any bills, and food expenses are taken care of, including any maintenance on equipment.”

You winced as his hand came to cup your cheek. ‘I know you’re smart enough to know the right answer here. This can be so easy...all you have to do is be reasonable.”

“You’re forcing me into this.” Your eyes were accusing, though your voice was barely above a whisper.

“What did you call me earlier? A thief?”

Chrollo tilted your head up; you didn’t fight back. He had you in a corner; just when you thought you were going to be free, he caught you.

“If that’s what you think, you shouldn’t be surprised I want to steal you away.”
“Oh my god.” You whispered; you covered your nose at the sudden stench that seemed to assault your every sense.

The monster raised his head; you worried it might’ve heard you, it’s long ears pricking up attentively, but after a moment, it seemed to relax.

“What should I do?” You wondered anxiously. “Should I run away? What if he hears me?”

Truthfully, you only guessed it was a male; it looked like something out of a nightmare, thin and tall, it’s body looked as if it’s very skin was rotting from it’s own stench. It’s eyes were trained on the ground, almost as if...

You peered in closer, your fear slightly abated by your curiosity. “It’s like he’s looking for something...what is he? What’s he looking for?”

The monster craned it’s neck lower, it’s paws seeming to search through the grass almost desperately; it’s focus didn’t seem to be on anything else.

“I really should go.” You took a deep, calming breath. “For all I know, he’s dangerous or looking for food. I can’t believe this, no one will!”

Before you could walk away from your hiding place behind the boulder, the monster paused abruptly; you froze, fearing he had sensed your movement. Instead of charging at you like you expected, the monster grabbed at the ground quickly, clutching something in it’s claws with a moaning sound.

You stood stock still as it smoke seemed to smoulder from it’s body, the darkness swirling around it in a thick fog; you couldn’t help stare open mouthed as you saw a boy emerge from the smoke, naked and breathing harshly.

“Who’s there?!”

You jumped and hide behind the boulder at the hoarse yell.

“What the hell? What the hell did I just see?!” You found yourself even more panicked; surely you were dreaming, surely you were just tired from your hike and hallucinated the whole thing.

“I know someone’s there...just come out dammit!”

You took a deep breath; so he had sensed you. Holding your arms firmly to your sides, you slowly stepped out into the clearing.

The boy’s eyes widened before narrowing in anger and horror. “What did you see?”

“I-I saw you…” You began quietly, averting your eyes and being careful to keep your distance; the scowling boy was scaring much more than the monster form he had taken. “I saw you pick up something and change...can you put some clothes on please?”

To your shock, the boy’s face flushed in embarrassment.

“This is taking a weird turn.” You almost laughed as he ran behind and tree; you heard the shuffling of clothes and a second later he reappeared, his firm scowl still in place.
“What the hell are you doing up here anyway? This is a place for training, not a damn nature walk.”

“I was on a hike.” You said defensively. “I thought I smelled something burning, and thought maybe there was a forest fire…”

His face darkened; he looked down, a hint of shame on his face. “You better forget what you saw.”

Your eyes widened. “What, are you going to kill me?!”

“Wha-?! No!” It was the boy’s turn to be defensive. “I just mean...didn’t it scare you?”

“Yeah.” You nodded. “But, it’s not that big a deal. You don’t seem like you’re going to hurt me or anything. How did you-?”

“It’s part of a curse.” he answered shortly, clenching his fists anxiously. “*Dammit it all! What should I do? It’s not like I can get Hatori out here to erase her memory...but, she seems calm. Maybe if I just explain...*”

The boy sat away from you, leaning against the boulder; he sighed in relief and exhaustion. “When I take this off,” he held out his wrist to show you a bracelet. “I change into that thing.”

You blinked at the way he spat out his words. “I don’t know what to say...I’m sorry.”

The boy scoffed. “It’s been a family tradition so to speak.”

You decided to sit down next to him; he looked over at you warily.

“What’s your name?”

He blinked. “Kyo Sohma.”

“Hi Kyo.” You smiled and waved lightly. “I’m camping not too far away from here. Are you hungry? It’s almost dinner time.”

Kyo looked at you skeptically. “I’m in training. I have to catch my own food.”

“But...it’s nearly night. How are you even going to see anything?” You said; while his frown didn’t waver, you saw his eyebrow twitch. “I caught some fish earlier, and I have rice. It’s not much, but it’s something.”

As if on cue, you heard a low rumbling; Kyo coughed.

“Just this one time?”

“Okay...thanks.” he conceded roughly.

Over dinner, Kyo had told you the basics of the Sohma family curse; when you asked him more about his cat form, he went silent. You seemed to have touched a nerve and quickly backed off; he didn’t have to talk about it just yet and something told you he was slow to opening up in the first place.

“I can’t believe it.” You said in amazement. “To think all these years I’ve been taking hugs for granted and there’s a group of people who...”

Kyo looked up at you from his bowl. “Hey, don’t get all mopey about it. I mean, it’s not a big deal, I’m not a huggy guy in the first place.”
You smiled slightly. “Sorry, I’m sure me being upset isn’t helping you. Tell you what, to apologize for walking in on you, how about you spend the night? This tent’s kinda small, but it’s warmer than sleeping outside.”

Kyo didn’t bother to tell you he enjoyed sleeping under the stars, breathing in the fresh air; there was something in your warm invitation he couldn’t resist.

The next morning, you awoke to an orange cat curled up to your chest; you smiled and patted his head gingerly.

The next day, you went on a hike together.

The next day, you caught more fish.

The next, the next, the next….

Before you knew it, Kyo was practically living with you in the little tent. What was meant to be a solo camping trip for relaxation turned into a summer camp trip. Kyo was a bit of a grumpy house guest, but he was always right there giving you a hand with cooking or mending or lighting the fire, waking up next to you as a fluffy pillow of sorts; it was amazing how kind he could be after all that blustering early on.

“I wonder...he must not have many friends with that curse hanging over his head. From what it sounds like, he’s not that close to many of his family members either, aside from his sensei.” You watched as he chopped firewood; he absolutely loved any physical activity, anything to release some energy. “I’m glad I can be a friend to him.”

“Hey, you awake over there?” Kyo’s critical tone was mixed with playfulness. “I got all the wood ready; I told you I could chop the crap out of that tree!”

You stared at the immense pile of wood stacked up beside your tent.

“This is great but.” You tried to stifle a chuckle.

Kyoko raised and eyebrow. “What?”

“I really don’t need this much.” You smiled apologetically. “I’m going home in a day, and this is way more than I need.”

The smile fell from your face as Kyo dropped the hatchet; he was staring at you as if he had never seen you before.

“You’re...leaving?”

“Um, yeah.” You felt a bit guilty at his expression. “I’m sorry I didn’t say anything earlier. To be honest, I’ve been having so much fun, I lost track of the time.”

“So stay.” Kyo said.

“I can’t though, I need to get home. I have school and work and-”

Your words were cut off as Kyo held you to him in a vice grip; he was so fast, you barely saw him move.

“I-I….don’t want you to go.”
“Kyo, I’m sorry, but I have-” You stopped and looked down at his arms wrapped around your body tightly. “You-you’re-!”

Kyo pulled back slightly and stared you up and down with wide eyes; a broad smile graced his features.

“This proves it...this proves we need to stay together!” Kyo crushed you to him, almost knocking the wind right out of you. “The curse is gone. There’s nothing keeping us apart.”

“Kyo, I’m happy for you, but I can’t stay.” You tried in vain to push him away; for a moment he was as still as a statue.

“You can’t stay? But you have to!” Kyo protested; his expression was worn with anguish and anger. His eyes were tired and strained from the fear of loneliness, of losing what had been so far out of his reach for so long. “Why the hell would you do that?! I thought you were happy.”

You looked up at him pleadingly; the last thing you wanted to do was hurt him, but this was insane. You had no idea what had come over him, but it was clear Kyo was unstable. You weren’t safe.

“I need to go home though...people know I’m up here, they’ll come looking for me.”

Kyo smiled tremulously. “Up here? All the way up in the mountains? Most people never come here at all, they’d get lost and die. But don’t worry about that, if you stick with me, nothing bad will happen to you.”

You shook like a leaf at his piercing gaze. “Was that a threat?”

“Damn, is it that cold out?” Kyo whispered as he carefully helped you up. “Let’s go inside the tent, okay? It’s been a long day, you should get some rest.”

Kyo practically carried you to the tent.

“He’s been training in martial arts.” Your thoughts were racing; Kyo laid next to you on the futon and drew a thick blanket over you both. He had never felt so at peace before, lying next to the first woman to truly love him. Or so he thought.

“I don’t have any weapons on me or anything.” You fretted. “There’s no way I can take him in a fight...he’s got me trapped up here.”

“You feel warmer now?” Kyo asked softly; he would try to be gentle for your sake. You had already done so much for him, it was the least he could do. Maybe you would even smile at him soon; you looked so down for some reason.

“Eh, it’ll be okay. She’s just tired.” Kyo assured himself as he rolled over and placed an arm around your stomach in a half hug; he couldn’t wait to wake up next to you every day for the rest of your lives.


Kyo smiled to himself as you silently cried. “Huh, maybe hugging ain’t so bad.”
“Are there any more nominations?”

Everyone in the classroom was silent; you and Yuki stood in front of his desk. He was smiling politely, but you couldn’t feel more nervous.

“Then here are your class representative.” the teacher led the other students in brief applause; Yuki turned to you and inclined his head.

“I’m looking forward to working with you.”

You bowed back and tried to give him a bracing smile back. “Same here Sohma-san.”

“I don’t know if I can do this.” You could barely pay attention throughout the rest of class and nearly missed hearing the lunch bell altogether; you wished you had enough backbone to have refused the position. It’s not like you didn’t think you could manage it, but you could foresee a few problems.

A few hundred problems to be exact.

When you opened the door to your locker at the end of the day, at least over fifty notes came tumbling out; you heard a discreet whisper and a laugh as you stared down at the pile.

“I didn’t expect them to come so fast.” You walked over to the cleaning supply closet and found a broom; you sighed and crouched down to pick up a few of the folded papers. They all said about the same thing:

“Whore, don’t get any ideas.”

“You’re not special, so don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Bitch.”

“Stay away from Yuki-kun or you’ll regret it.”

“Prince Yuki isn’t yours. Die.”

“Excuse me, what’s this?”

You gave Yuki a half smile. “Well, it’s not fanmail, heheh,”

“Do you need help cleaning?” Yuki asked as he picked up a few of the letters himself. “What is-”

You froze as Yuki began to scan the notes with a blank expression.

“Um, don’t worry about it, I got this!” You tried to sound cheerful and reached for the handful of papers. “I can clean this up myself, you really don’t have to help.”

“I’m...sorry. This is…”

Yuki reached down and began gathering up every note in his arms. “I’ll burn these in the kitchen ovens.”
“You don’t have to go that far! Let’s just throw them in the recycling bin, it’s really not that big of a deal Sohma-san.”

He paused and frowned sadly. “This is simply disgusting. I apologize, it seems I’ve caused you trouble.”

“It’s not your fault, you didn’t ask for these psychos to threaten me. I’m sure it’s just threats, so don’t feel bad, okay?”

“Okay.” Yuki tossed the heap into the nearest bin and took the broom and dustpan from you. “I have no idea what to even say, except I’m sorry. I don’t understand why this is happening.”

“It’s because I’m going to be working with you as class rep.”

“But you weren’t even nominated, the teacher appointed you.” Yuki said in confusion. “You had no choice and what does that have to do with this?”

You looked around feeling a bit awkward at having to explain. “Boy, you really don’t get it? I mean, I guess you wouldn’t know about the pact….you see, the fangirls in our class made a deal that they wouldn’t volunteer for class representative if you were picked. The teacher just happened to pick me…”

“That’s just ridiculous!” Yuki shook his head in shame. “They have no right—I’m sorry. If you’d like, I’d understand if you went to our teacher to quit. No—” Yuki looked you in the eyes. “I’ll quit… I don’t really care that much to be the class representative anyway. I was too cowardly to turn down the job and you’re paying for it.”

“Wow, you really are like prince.”

Yuki blushed slightly in embarrassment. “Please don’t call me that.”

“Oh I won’t but I think I finally see it myself, why the girls are so crazy for you. You’re very… gallant? Chivalrous? Some proper word for nice, I guess.” You suddenly laughed at his expression. “I don’t mean to sound weird, but it is true.”

Yuki turned away from you. “If I was so great, I wouldn’t be causing people so much trouble…”

“What does he mean by that?” You wondered briefly; at the moment, you tried to focus on the situation at hand. “Sohma-san, I have a request to make.”

“Yes?”

“Please don’t quit the position.”

“Why?” Yuki asked; he faced you with a weary look. “I’m not even qualified.”

“Are you kidding? Sohma-san, the whole class looks up to you. You’re smart and diligent, and fair; if anyone should be the class rep, it’s you. I’ll admit, that beside, I have an ulterior motive.”

Yuki’s posture loosened a bit as he looked at you quizzically. “What would that be?”

“I’d like to be able to get to know you. I can already tell, you’re a kind person. I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather be partners with. So, will you stay on?”

“But those letters…”

“Who cares? If anyone gives me trouble, then fine. I won’t let any jerks tell me who I can and can’t
hang out with.” You said loudly and firmly for anyone to hear.

A slow smile came across Yuki’s face, maybe the first one you had ever seen that was unguarded; he nodded and you smiled back warmly.

“Good. This is going to be a great school year!”

“A-alright then.”
Yuki Sohma Pt. 2 Finale

Yuki tried so hard to be perfect; maybe it was only a matter of time until it was too much to bear. It was inevitable that certain events were to be carried out in lieu of the circumstances.

“Yuki-san, are you spacing out?” You asked him incredulously.

“Ah, forgive me, I was just thinking.”

You chuckled. “I’m surprised, you’re usually so attentive. Is there something on your mind you want to discuss?”

“Us.”

“No, it’s quite alright.” Yuki smiled. “Please continue, you were talking about the festival?”

“I was thinking a cafe, but it needs to have a theme, something that will make it stand out, but also something everyone would find appealing…” You tapped the tip of your pen on the list of brainstormed ideas; you wanted to at least have some possible options if your classmates weren’t certain what direction to go in for their activity. “Maybe a more traditional setting, like a tea house? It may be a bit old fashioned, but I think that would have a certain charm and homey quality too.”

“That sounds wonderful, I would vote for it.”

“Aw, I’m sure your idea is better.” You nibbled on the pen’s cap.

“If I may be honest...I haven’t really thought of anything.” Yuki admitted. “I’m sorry, I feel like you’re doing all the work.”

“That’s fine, we just need some sample ideas after all.”

Yuki felt some relief as you continued to talk; whenever he wasn’t on top of things or showed he wasn’t perfect, you never complained or admonished him. You simply told him it was okay and moved on. It was nice, to not have to always know the answers and have the best ideas. You expected him to do well, but you didn’t hold him to the standard indefinitely; if Yuki fell short, you still talked to him like you did everyday.

“Yuki-san, why don’t you dress up as a noble from the feudal era?” You asked teasingly. “A prince like you should try to look the part.”

“Hmph, now who’s distracted?” Yuki replied.

Truth be told, Yuki spent most of his time with you seemingly spacing out; he sincerely meant to be a better listener, god knows you were always so focused if he was talking, but he couldn’t help watch the shape your lips took with every syllable or the way your eyebrows arched or the simply adorable act of your scrunching up in the corners of your eyes whenever you smiled-

“Yuki-san?”

“Y-yes?”

“I…”

The two of you had ended up in front of your locker; there was a note sticking out of the slit. As if in
a trance, Yuki reached over to take it out.

“Yuki-san, please, just leave it-”

You tried to gently take it from his fingers, but Yuki had snatched it away and was already reading it; you sighed and waited for his reaction, but he was keeping his mouth shut.

“It can’t be that bad, right?” You let out a laugh and tried to take away the letter; you flinched as Yuki began ripping it into little shreds.

Yuki’s style was graceful and dignified, not abrupt and cold; the only times you had ever seen him upset was when his wild cousin was concerned, but even then it all added up to annoyance, not anger.

“I’m so sorry for this.” Yuki said stiffly trying to keep his composure in front of you; the last thing he wanted was to upset you, but this was almost too much to bear.

To read the disgusting words on that sheet of paper that was directed at someone he adored was torture; if you retaliated, the girls harassing you would just get angrier, and if you kept silent and stuck around him, they became angrier still. Either way, the messages were coming in on a weekly basis, and you were even pretty sure who the ringleader was, but you had no solid proof to go to a teacher.

“Yuki-san, don’t think this is your fault.”

“There has to be something I can do.”

No one else was in the hallway, so you felt safe to put your hand on his shoulder; Yuki gave you an imploring look.

“It’s okay.” You leaned up to kiss his cheek. “Yuki, this proves we need to keep us a secret. It’d just make people more hostile and I don’t want anyone to talk badly of you. Please, promise me.”

You let your hand slip from his shoulder at his silence. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

Yuki’s gaze softened at your smile, but once he was alone, he let himself frown angrily.

“You’ve done so much for me….I want to return the favor.”
“Motoko-chan!”

Motoko sighed impatiently as Minami waited for her in front of her locker; Mio and Mai were off to the wayside and holding their own noses tightly.

“I told you, the next club meeting had to be moved to next week for the room renovations, you’ll simply have to—”

“What’s that smell?” Mio interrupted for a second and then clamped her hands back over her mouth and nose.

“What are you—ugh!” Motoko held her own nose tightly; she was right in front of her own locker now and the stench was enough to have other students stop in their tracks and stare at them.

“Did you leave your lunch in there or something?” Mio whispered fretfully.

“No!” Motoko insisted; with one hand she managed to unlock the door, the other hand covered her nose as she glared. “This is ridiculous, I’m sure it’s not even coming from my locker.”

You and Yuki watched the scene from the other end of the hallway.

“What’s going on?” You wondered out loud. “I can smell it from here, whatever that is.”

“That trash; I’ll deal with her later.” Motoko stole a glance at you and glared before opening her locker; all thoughts of revenge disappeared once a mouse came tumbling from the top of her books. As one of the girls fell back against the locker next to Motoko’s, three more rats fell out, stiff and halfway rotted.

“WHO DID THIS?!” Motoko screeched.

“Motoko-chan...there’s a note.” Mai pointed a trembling finger to one of the rats still laying limp inside the locker; on it’s neck was a rolled up scrap of paper, tied by a loose thread.

“Get it.”

Mai backed away. “I’m not touching that!”

“Allow me.”

Motoko’s eyes lit up as Yuki smiled down at her; with a look of calm distaste, he swiftly pulled out the paper and unrolled it.

“It says to cease your bullying or next time there’ll be worse than rodents trapped in your locker.” Yuki said calmly. “Oh my, this sounds serious. I expected better of you Minagawa-san…”

“Y-Yuki, I-I-!” Motoko felt the eyes of everyone fixed on her; holding back bitter tears, she ran past you without so much as a word. One by one the other students were filing into their own classrooms and quietly conversing about what had just happened; you walked up to Yuki, who still held the note in his hand with a strange look of satisfaction on his face.

“Yuki-san…” You began carefully; you made sure to stay away from the dead rats, though Yuki seemed completely unperturbed. Even his words of disappointment and concern seemed feigned; all
the more unnerving was his gentle smile as he crumpled up the note and tossed it back on top of the small pile of rats.

“My, she seemed to understand quickly enough.” Yuki closed the door, locking it with a click. “It’s a shame such measures had to be taken, but I truly believe this will benefit her in the long run. It was just shameful what she was doing, don’t you agree?”

Your mouth struggled to form a legitimate sentence as Yuki laughed in a charmingly bashful sort of way at your muddled state.

“I know this must seem a tad extreme, but as I said, it will be better for everyone if she learns her lesson now.”

“But Yuki, you can’t just-”

Yuki put a finger to your lips to hush you, eyes glazing over as he gave you and adoring smile. “I’m just happy I could finally do something for you, like a real prince would.”
Five years ago:

“Mommy, what’s wrong with that boy?” a girl who looked to be only a toddler whispered.

“Sh!” The mother hushed her daughter and quickly pulled her along. “That’s not polite sweetie-”

“But his face is-”

Todoroki looked away slightly as he walked with Endeavor, who was going on about something.

“They’re a good family. We’ve been in contact with them for years, and their daughter has a very powerful Quirk.”

“Yes father.” Todoroki replied absently, only putting in as much effort as he needed to look attentive; these days, he was more bitter than scared. It seemed to appease Endeavor, or he didn’t notice from the way he continued on without even acknowledging his son’s statement.

“She’s about your age; you both may be a bit young still, but we should strive to make connections as earlier as possible. Be on your best behavior.”

“Don’t you mean what you want?” was Todoroki’s unspoken response; he was already on thin ice from skipping out on training exercises.

“Yes father.”

“Welcome.” Your father greeted both Todoroki and Endeavor with a smile. “Please come in, my daughter is upstairs. Honey, our guests are here!”

“Coming!” You called as you rushed down the stairs; one of your braids was a bit lopsided. “Hi!” you waved at the strangers; Endeavor inclined his head and Todoroki nodded stiffly.

“Shouto-kun, would you like my daughter to show you our backyard? There’s a swing set and a slide.”

His tone was so welcoming, but Todoroki could only nod once more and barely crack a polite smile; he really couldn’t care less about any of this, even if you and your father both seemed relatively nice. He followed you as you rushed over and slid open the shoji door with a grin.

“My dad just put this up a couple weeks ago!” You led Todoroki to the slide. “I like to sit up here and play spy. Do you play spy?”

“...no.”

“Here, you can be the spy and I’ll try to steal your stuff.” You handed him a pinecone. “This is your grenade. Go sit up there and I’ll hide; when I count to ten, you gotta look for me, okay?”

“What’s the point of all this?” Todoroki wondered as he climbed up the slide and took a seat in the small dome. “He said we’d be coming here to discuss me getting married to this girl someday.”

Todoroki closed his eyes and sighed. “As if. That bastard; and what’s with this game?”

“Okay, look for me now!”
Todoroki peered outside the dome and looked around apathetically; though after a second, he was somewhat perturbed. There was only a few small bushes and a fountain in the yard, but no where you could have possibly hidden.

“Her Quirk.” Todoroki realized. “Is it invisibility, shape shifting? That is pretty useful, though I’m surprised my father would think so.” he knew the only thing Endeavor cared about was raw power; Todoroki sighed in frustration and looked up at the sky.

“You found me!” You shrieked and giggled as you flew farther above him. Todoroki blinked; he couldn’t even sense your presence.

“Wow, you’re pretty good at this game.” You sat down next to him, almost floated down really. Todoroki shrugged and you frowned slightly.

“Shouto-kun? What happened to your eye?”

“I had an accident. “ came the practiced response. “At least she’s not acting as if nothing’s wrong, I guess.”

The burn was as clear as day; most people pretended as if they didn’t notice it, or others would try to and be caught staring or gaping in surprise. Most people knew who he was and who his family was, so they refrained from too much gossip. Todoroki learned to ignore the stares and concerned glances after a while. It wasn’t anyone’s business anyway.

“Here.”

Todoroki jerked back the second your lips made contact with his left eye. “Hey!”

You looked at him worriedly. “I’m sorry; my mom used to kiss my bumps and stuff when she was here. It made me feel better…”

“Where is she now?”

“In the sky.” You said. “I tried to go see her once, but my dad said she was too far up to fly to. But I can still go pretty high up, want to try it?”

“Flying?”

“Sure. Oh, wait.” You scratched your arm. “Dad says I can't take people flying with me, cause I might drop them...when we get married, I'll be big enough to carry you though!”

“You want to get married?” Todoroki asked. You must be a couple of years younger than him; frankly, you seemed naive. You didn't even seem to understand the gravity of the meeting between your parent and his.

“Well, maybe…” You suddenly looked bashful. “You seem really nice. Do you not want to get married? Is it ‘cause I tricked you?”

“Huh?”

“I should’ve told you I could fly before we played spy. If we get married, I’ll let you be the thief.”

“That’s not really the point…” Todoroki was almost irritated by now; still, you made him curious. “Is this what kids are usually like? Is this how it is when you have a normal family?”

You smiled again and tugged lightly on a braid. “You like my hair? I can teach you how to braid
Todoroki blushed; he didn’t mean to stare at your hair. “Maybe later.”

“Okay.” You pouted. “Are you hungry? I can make us a snack!”

“Sure, I guess.”

“You’re really quiet. I talk a lot; my dad calls me motor mouth sometimes. I usually don’t talk much to strangers, but you seem really nice. I like you, even if you’re kinda quiet.”

He didn’t even know what to say as you dragged him around the large house; there seemed to be a lot of twists and turns, almost as though you weren’t even sure where your own kitchen was.

“Okay, we’re here.”

“Why didn’t we just go this way earlier?”

You had somehow pulled him back at the entrance to the back yard and took a left turn that apparently went directly to the kitchen.

“I wanted to show you the house.” You grinned. “Okay, I’ll make you onigiri; my dad had our neighbor cooked some rice for us, but I know how to wrap it myself.”

“Alright.” Todoroki said a bit impatiently as he waited for you to shape a couple of somewhat crumbly onigiri. He took a bite from one; it was too salty.

“My dad said it’s good to know how to cook for your wife. My mom made these for me before.”

“Mhm.” Todoroki choked down the food with a little grimace.

“She said she was really bad at cooking, but she made me cookies for school; she made these ones that were half chocolate and half vanilla, and for my last birthday she baked me a whole cake! It was this big!” You rambled; Todoroki nodded and discreetly threw away the rest of the onigiri in a nearby plant pot.

“I can use the microwave, but not the oven or the stove. Mom said I’m too young to use the oven and I’m too short to reach the stove, so I might burn myself, but I think I could.” You finished shaping your rice with a loud pat. “She said when I’m older, she’d teach me how, so…”

“So?” Todoroki asked; you had stopped talking finally.

“She said she would, but then she got sick. She said dad would teach me.”

Todoroki wondered what was worse; a parent being somewhere else or being gone forever.

“I wish she could’ve. She said she was sorry, but it wasn’t her fault…it wasn’t…”

You weren’t smiling now and Todoroki realized he really didn’t like it.

“You make good rice.”

“Yay!” Your eyes lightened up a little. “There wasn’t too much salt?”

“No.”
“Shouto, it’s time to leave.” Endeavor stepped into the kitchen; Todoroki immediately straightened up.

“Already?!” You went over to your dad as he followed Endeavor. “Can’t Shouto-kun stay a little longer?”

“No honey, he needs to go home now and train.” he patted your head and looked over at Endeavor. “Perhaps next month we could schedule another playdate? Shouto-kun seems to have made quite the impression.” Your father smiled kindly at Todoroki; he couldn’t remember the last time a grown up was so nice to him.

Endeavor fought the urge to sneer at the term. “I suppose. Come Shouto, there’s still time left to go over your drills.”

“Yes father.”

Todoroki turned back to glance at you quickly.

“Bye Shouto-kun, I can’t wait to play spy again! I’ll make you special snacks too, so hurry up!”

“Okay…” Todoroki was glad his father was already out the door before he could see him smiling.

“What an undisciplined child. Still, her status will be worth the effort.”

Todoroki ignored his father and stowed his hands away in his pockets to grip onto the small pine cone.

“That was fun..."
Three years ago:

“Shouto-kun!”

“Hey.” Todoroki nodded cordially as you waved; he glanced around idly. “The garden looks nice.”

A small patch of soil covered a corner of your backyard; sprouting plants were almost ready to be harvested. You placed down your watering can and walked up to him with a broad grin as you wiped your hands on your pants.

“Thanks, I’m growing more aloe for your burn.” You pointed to a couple of rows proudly. “They’re coming in pretty nice, they’ll be ready to pick in another week maybe.”

“I can just buy it at the store you know.”

“But this is all natural, and it’s free!” You told him with a laugh.

Todoroki shrugged slightly and sat down on the grass nearby; his legs were sprawled in an indignified way, much different than his usual stiff posture. You smiled as you sat down next to him; it was nice to see him let down his guard. Todoroki glanced between you and the plot discreetly.

“It doesn’t usually hurt much anyway. You only have so much space, why not grow more tomatoes or something?”

You didn’t notice the way he seemed to wait for your answer as you finished setting up the small gate to keep out animals; as you took a seat next to him, Todoroki’s eyes searched your face. He always seemed to be searching for something when he looked at people, analyzing them, though you couldn’t imagine why he’d feel the need to do so with you.

“I don’t mind. Anything for my future husband, right?” You poked his shoulder and smiled cheekily.

The engagement had never actually taken off; to be frank, your father was put off by Endeavor and after a while, it became clear that he didn’t see you as much more than a tool for his name to become more renowned. It disgusted your father, and after less than a year of monthly meetings, he called off any plans for an engagement; fortunately, he realized Todoroki didn’t have the same nature as Endeavor. You practically begged him to let your friend continue his visits and Todoroki agreed right in front of his irate father; it made you happy to see him standing up for himself, although in some ways you felt his efforts were more harmful than empowering.

“I shouldn’t try to talk to him about it now.” You thought as Todoroki gazed at the garden with a small upward quirk of his lips. “He seems to be in a good mood today, I don’t want to ruin it.”

“You should be careful what jokes you make. If someone overheard, they may get the wrong idea.”

“Oh, lighten up.” You laughed. “Besides, it’s just the two of us here right? So how’s school going?”

“Fine.”

“Did you finish your exams? I just got done and I think I did okay.”

“They gave us the results last week.”
“So what’d you get?”

“I passed.”

“That’s great, we should go celebrate! We can go to that new Mongolian grill place, I heard a lot of classmates talk about how good it is.” You weren’t put off by his brief replies; that was just Todoroki. Still, there was something odd about the way he looked down at the mention of celebrating. “Hey, what’s up?”

“I’m fine.”

“Oh, it’s okay Shouto-kun, we don’t have to do anything….I-I know you’re busy with training and stuff…” You shrugged carelessly, trying to mask your disappointment; unfortunately, you didn’t have the same poker face as him.

Todoroki stared steadfastly at his feet; he didn’t mean to make you feel bad. It seemed every time you wanted to hang out outside your home, he was making up some excuse. After a while, you rarely even brought it up; you had hoped maybe this was the perfect opportunity. “It’s not that, it’s-” he picked at the grass. “It’s my mother’s birthday.”

You kept silent for a moment; this was the first time he had even mentioned her in two years.

“Today?” You looked at him questioningly. He nodded.

“Shouto-kun….I know this isn’t really what you want to hear-”

“I don’t want to discuss this.”

You frowned. “Now hold on just a second, you’re the one who brought it up.”

“You asked me what was wrong. I told you, it wasn’t an invitation to meddle in my business.” Todoroki said evenly.

“I’m just saying, it is her birthday. I mean,” You continued hesitantly. “I’m sure she misses you. Maybe you could just-”

“I remind her of him. I highly doubt throwing a pot of boiling water in my face means she misses seeing it.”

You felt a lump swell up in your throat; you could see were this was going to go, but you couldn’t stop yourself. You hated seeing him this way. “Shouto-kun, please listen to me. You should go see her; I know you miss her. You can’t just avoid this forever.”

Any other day, Todoroki would probably politely avoid the subject; as time went on, you liked to think the two of you had become closer. At the moment, you had the distinct feeling you had just crossed a line and there was no going back as he glared at you.

“You know, it’s really laughable how you think you know best in this situation.”

He didn’t know why he was getting upset with you, but at the same time, Todoroki felt justified. Here you were with your happy family, telling him what he should do to fix his situation. It was easy for someone like you to talk, to think something as simple as a conversation could change years of abuse from his father and the damaged relationship with his institutionalized mother.

“I’m not saying I know-”
“You’re giving unwarranted advice, as if the solution was so easy. You have a happy life, a normal childhood. You couldn’t possibly understand and you have no right to be telling me what I should or shouldn’t do.” Todoroki honestly didn’t mean to sound so bitter, but the emotion came out anyway despite your hurt expression. “It must be nice to be so oblivious.”

“I could say the same thing to you.”

Todoroki gazed at you coldly. “Just what does that mean?”

“You’re making excuses. Why don’t you see it?” You asked with an almost pleading tone.

“Shut your mouth.”

Your eyes burned, but you weren’t about to budge. “Your mother is all alone on her birthday, she’s stuck in that place and if you at least tried to talk to her—”

“Do you ever stop talking?” Todoroki cut you off. “You don’t seem to know how to go five seconds without babbling about something. I almost think you love the sound of your own voice; drop the therapist act and stay out of it. You don’t know anything about this.”

“No, I don’t; I can’t!”

Todoroki frowned as you stood up abruptly. “So why don’t you—?”

“You’re just wasting it!” You told him tearfully as you banged your fist on one knee in frustration. “You know where she is, you have the chance to talk to her and see her and be with her, but you won’t! I know she hurt you, but she’s still here! You can make things better, you have the opportunity if you just tried! She’s still here, she’s alive and she’s not buried under the ground rotting away—” you screwed up your face to keep the tears from leaking out. “I would give anything to at least tell my mom...I wanted her to be there, I want her to be here, but she just can’t.”

You wiped your eyes and breathed in harshly. “She’s dead. She won’t be there when I graduate or when I get married or when I get my first job or when I have children.” you shook your head and pushed back your hair. “You know, I can barely even remember her. I try to talk to dad, but he hates even bringing it up. He still misses her, we both do; we love her but she’s gone. But your mom isn’t Shouto-kun; I know maybe things won’t get better, but at least you have a chance.”

“I…”

“Look, you don’t have to do it today or tomorrow or even this year, but if you ever decided to try, you can.” You tried to smile at him. “Isn’t that worth something...? I wish you would, because I know what it’s like to lose someone. I mean, from what you told me, it sounded like she really did love you. I couldn’t imagine her not still loving you, but you’ll never know what might happen if you don’t talk to her. If I could, I’d want to. I—” you gulped down your sob. “I didn’t even get to say goodbye...I don’t want that for you Shouto-kun.”

“I’m sorry.”

You buried your face in his shoulder, your tears seeping in through his shirt.

“I shouldn’t have gotten mad at you. I wasn’t thinking…”

You laughed slightly. “Now that’s definitely not like you.”

Todoroki put a hand on the back of your head. “Can we go to that grill today?”
“Sure.” You pulled back and grimaced. “Sorry about your shirt.”

“It’s fine.” Todoroki paused and looked down. “I can’t do it right now.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to. Just…” you held his hand. “Don’t dismiss it as a possibility; now that’d really not be like you.”

“How so?” he raised an eyebrow.


“You look fine, let’s just go.” Todoroki pulled on your arm to raise you up.

“No way! I’m at least going to put on clean pants or something, just give me a sec. Be right back!”

Todoroki stared as you rushed inside your house; he sighed deeply and laid back in the grass. He really hadn’t meant to say anything at all.

“Maybe deep down...I wanted to tell her. I wanted someone to tell me it was going to be okay...”

Todoroki sighed again looked up at the sky; you were taking a bit longer than usual to get cleaned up, and you seemed so adamant about it now that the two of you were actually going somewhere. He couldn’t help wondering why it was so important that you looked nice.

He glanced down at his damp shirt. “How long has she been feeling that way? She never told me she hadn’t been able to say goodbye to her mother. I had no idea, all these years...some future husband I am-”

Todoroki sat up suddenly and slapped his hands to his face. “She was just joking idiot; stop thinking like that, the engagement’s been off since we were kids.”

“Okay I’m ready!” You called out as you locked your front door; you smoothed down the skirt to your white dress.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

You blinked and crossed your arms over your chest. “Hey, I like this dress, what’s wrong with it?”

Todoroki shrugged. “You’ll get it dirty more easily.”

“Oh.” You frowned. “Dammit, hold on!”

He breathed in relief; walking side by side with you wearing a white dress-

“Dammit.” he cursed and scratched his head.

You came out in a minute with a smile. “Okay, let’s go, I’m starving! I have a coupon with me, so-”

“I’m paying.”

“But I asked you to come-”

Todoroki cut you off stubbornly. “It’s embarrassing to make a woman pay.”

“Oh brother, what are you, fifty? At least take the coupon.”
“Alright.” Todoroki began to sweat lightly. “Shit. Is it weird that I insisted on paying?”

“I’m sorry about earlier. I picked a bad time to talk about it.” You said suddenly.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m the one who upset you, I didn’t even think about your mother.” Todoroki replied quietly. “Do you think about her often?”

“Yeah.” You smiled. “I try not to though, at least not enough to make me start crying.”

“It’s okay to be sad about it. She sounds wonderful….I’m sorry I can’t do anything to help about missing her.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I should be able to make you feel a bit better at least.” Todoroki’s tone was casual. “What kind of husband would I be if I couldn’t make my future wife stop crying?”

“Ha, guess we’ll have to get a divorce then, huh?” You snorted as you chuckled and Todoroki smiled bemusedly.

“You don’t want to try to make it work?”

“Nope. I’ll just take all your money instead when you become a pro or something.” You poked his shoulder with a teasing grin. “And I’m taking the kids with me.”

“I won’t let you go.”

Todoroki stopped and turned to you with a small smile. “Never.”

You tried to smile back as he turned back around with a low chuckle. “Heh. Yeah, yeah.”

“Hurry up, we don’t want to get there too late, right?”

“Right…” You nodded. “Huh…well, Shouto’s so serious usually, he’s probably doesn’t even get how weird that joke sounded.”

And so you walked on with him, smiling peacefully.
“I'm happy for you.”

Todoroki looked down at his left hand with a contemplative gaze. “It's not as if I can really control it yet. Besides, I still-”

You poked his arm. “It's okay. I'm glad you decided to try.”

Every time someone passed by too close, Todoroki fell silent; he was irritated that the trip to your home wasn’t going faster. He didn’t want to talk about this with other people in vicinity. As soon as a group of middle school students went by, he turned back to you.

“I’m going to go visit my mother again soon.” Todoroki scratched the back of his head in an unusual gesture of nervousness. "I don't even know how to begin to tell her all the things I've been thinking all this time.”

You kept silent as he became lost in thought. So much had changed; Todoroki had become so much stronger, but not just in strength. You honestly never thought you'd see the day where he'd claim his fire power as his own.

You still recalled with exact detail when he came to you the day he decided to stop using it all together; Endeavor had not really taken him very seriously, thinking it was only a matter of time until Todoroki accepted his half of the Quirk and gave in. You could hardly believe it yourself. Despite it being forced on him, Todoroki’s power and skill was unmatched in your eyes. While he listened to your opinion that time, he still was firm on his stance. He swore he would never use the power he inherited from his poor excuse of a father ever again.

“God, I really wished he wouldn't.” You remembered the sadness you felt that day; Todoroki believed he was doing the right thing, like he was overcoming an obstacle, not creating a new one or a limitation.

“So, how's your training been going?” Todoroki asked you after a while; the school you attended wasn't as prestigious as Yuuei, but it still had a respectful reputation. Your Quirk was a bit hard to use at times though; you could only carry yourself up for so long, but training and Todoroki’s advice was a big help.

“My strength training is going good. Here, I'll show you.” You crouched down on the ground in a catcher’s stance.

“What are you doing?”

You looked over your shoulder and gestured for him to come forward. “Climb on, I can carry you no problem. I can’t fly very fast, but we’ll be at my house before you know it.”

“This can't be appropriate.” Todoroki slowly placed his hands on your shoulders as you hooked his knees on your arms. His whole front was pressed against your back.

“Wow, you're really warm on one side.” You commented as you focused on rising into the air. “I know you can't control it yet, but be careful, I don't want to get a burn and drop you.”

“I'm fine, just focus on your Quirk.” Todoroki said absently as he involuntarily squeezed his legs tighter around you. You were carrying him with relative ease, but the idea you might send Todoroki
tumbling thirty feet to the cement wasn’t bothering him nearly as much as you being so comfortable with his whole body against yours.

“Alright, we're here!” You cheered. “Pretty quick huh?”

You let Todoroki slide down off you, and he shakily stood up and smoothed out his uniform shirt. “You okay Shouto?”

“Yeah.”

“Come in; my dad won’t be home until later tonight, so we’ll eat dinner now.” You told him as you began taking out thawed, pre cut chicken from the refrigerator. “Actually, it seems like he’s been coming home later and later nowadays.” you smiled slightly as you took a few green onion stalks from your garden basket.

“Here, you should cut it like this.” Todoroki moved behind you and took your hand holding the knife; he placed the tip down first and moved the blade smoothly down the plant. “This is more efficient.”

“Thanks.” You smiled at him and began doing it on your own; Todoroki moved back and started the oven with trembling fingers.

“We’re alone.” Todoroki glanced at you from the corner of his eye while he washed the chicken in the sink. “Damn...this is just getting worse and worse…”

“You’re really good at this stuff. Thanks a lot for teaching me.” You told him cheerfully as you finished dicing up the food and began stirring the chicken and onions bits into a wok.

“I learned a lot from my older sister, but I eventually got the hang of it myself.”

You bit your lip and your eyes flickered from him to the wok; Todoroki paused stirring the sauce. “What’s the matter?”

“I feel bad….I’m sure your mom would’ve loved to teach you.”

“Don’t be; after all, I’m lucky to have siblings at the very least.” Todoroki thought of you coming home to a empty house, your father staying longer and longer at work to escape the pain from the death of his wife. It was no wonder you clung to him at times; it seemed as though he was the only person you really had to talk to.

“So how’s that one guy doing? You know, the guy they had to muzzle?” You talked through the bites of food you simultaneously tried to swallow.

“He’ll get over it.” Todoroki answered after he chewed and took a sip of his water. “Are you disappointed?”

“Of what?”

“I couldn’t win.” Todoroki pushed his chicken around his plate. “When it came down to winning or losing, I couldn’t use my full powers.”

“Of course not! Shouto, you went in there and tried. Even if it was just for a bit, you overcame your block. You can’t expect it to happen all at once, but just the progress you made-”

Todoroki took another drink from his glass and waited for you to continue.
“It was so amazing to see, you have no idea. I was so happy I started crying right there.” You blushed a little as you downed your own cold glass of milk. “Well, I’m definitely glad you used the fire before you got hypothermia.” you told him. “I mean, were you seriously considering risking your life over it?”

He looked a bit abashed. “I admit, I was stubborn, but I’m here now, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, but what if you didn’t?” You lightly scolded. “I was really scared you know...I get you want to be a hero on your own terms, but try to think of the people who love you before you go off and put your life at risk unnecessarily. I don’t want you to end up as the world’s first ‘modern day man' trapped in ice. I guess then you could be a pro circus attraction instead-Shouto!?”

Todoroki had spit out the last of his drink all over the table cloth, hacking slightly from some of it having gone down the wrong pipe.

“Here,” You rushed over to his chair and began dabbing at his face and the soaked cloth. “And you tell me to slow down.” you mumbled lowly, wringing out your napkin in the sink.

“Sorry.” Todoroki wheezed and gulped a large breath.

“Eh, don’t worry about it. It’s getting pretty late; I’ll wash the dishes, you get some sleep.”

Todoroki massaged his throat lightly. “You don’t need to, I can help.”

“It’s fine Shouto.” You rolled your eyes and laughed. “Besides, what kind of future wife would I be if I couldn’t take care of a little chore? You’re still getting over your match anyway, so go get some rest and stop being so stubborn.”

Todoroki relented and walked upstairs to one of the guest rooms; the first time he had stayed the night, your father was reluctant. He had met you on your way home, limping and his eyes blank and dulled.

Your father was about to scold you, but you explained to him that Todoroki had ran away from his home; Endeavor had been particularly upset with his supposed decreasing motivation in training. When your father heard Todoroki mention that Endeavor had even blamed you as the source of his lack of concentration, he allowed Todoroki to stay in the guest room, as long as you promised to stay in your own room during the night.

Todoroki smiled a bit wryly; if your father knew how much you loved your fiance, Todoroki was sure he would never allow this.

“What am I thinking, she’d never do something as indecent as coming in here.” Todoroki buried his warm face in the blankets. He could faintly hear the dishes clinking against each other as you washed them. Otherwise, the house was almost completely silent; he listened for a bit and began to feel a bit off himself. “It must be lonely living here. There’s no one around most of the time. No mother or siblings, no friends coming over to visit, her father here for maybe only for a couple of hours a day. It’s just her, and me, when I get the time to stop by.”

After a few minutes, Todoroki could hear your footsteps on the slightly creaking hardwood floors; you came up the stairs and passed by his room and into your own. He heard it close gently, most likely you thought he was asleep and you didn’t want to disturb him. He felt a bit bad; what if you wanted to talk or hang out before going to sleep?

“Once we get married, we can live together. We won’t ever be lonely again. Maybe mother can even stay with us someday.” Todoroki fell asleep, for once feeling completely at peace. “When that
“day comes, we’ll never have to be apart. We can all be happy and me and her will always be together.”

The innocent smile slowly faded as he fell unconscious, unaware of the reality his future would soon bring.
Shouto Todoroki Pt. 4 Finale

It was Valentine’s Day.

Todoroki left his home feeling oddly light; most days he trudged to Yuuei with a heavy sigh, even if he was warming up to his classmates, he still felt a bit of a distance between them and him. He really would have liked it if you chose Yuuei to attend, but it didn’t bother him that much since your confession, especially considering what day it was.

True, while in this modern day in age reverse chocolates were common, the holiday was still primarily celebrated by women giving the one they loved chocolate. Todoroki had entertained the idea of giving you something that day, but he reconsidered. He wanted to wait until White day so he would have more time to pick out something just right, something that would make you throw your arms around him in joy, tugging him into your personal space, smiling lips dangerously close-

“Hey, pay attention.”

Todoroki looked up; Aizawa had skillfully thrown a bit of chalk at the red half of his hair, giving it a splotch of white dust. The other students looks at him curiously; someone as serious and dedicated as him spacing out was unthinkable.

Regardless of a few strange looks that were cast over him as he rushed out of the room the second school ended, nothing could dampen Todoroki’s considerably upbeat mood. As he approached your house, he felt as if nothing could make him-

“Hey Shouto.”

You were smiling brightly as he stepped inside the sitting room; that was nothing out of the ordinary. The red flush on your cheeks and the bouquet of roses you were carefully placing inside a vase full of water was what made him stop in his tracks.

“I...didn’t know you were growing roses.”

“Oh no, these aren’t from my garden.” You giggled. “The rosemary and thyme is growing nicely though; it’s been a pretty warm February...would you mind helping me pick them in a bit?”

Todoroki nodded but you left the room before he could really say anything; you practically bounced to the kitchen. He blinked as you began pulling out several pots and a cook book.

“Are you trying a new recipe today?” Todoroki asked as he looked over your shoulder at the page you had flipped to. He smiled a bit; it was for chocolate.

“Yeah, I’m making chocolate. I know sweets aren’t your favorite food, but would you mind sampling a few to let me know how it tastes?”

Todoroki’s brows furrowed; nothing was making sense. “Sample?”

“Just a few. I’ve never actually made them before.” You studied the ingredients list fixedly. “I should
have everything I need here...wait, cocoa powder? Would hot chocolate mix work? Hm...”

Todoroki’s blinked. “So, you’re just making it now?”

“Yep, but I think it should be decent.” You tied on an apron, a sight that would normally provoke a much more positive reaction from your friend. Now he was staring coldly at the garment, the book, the ingredients and pans clumsily laid out on the usually uncluttered counters.

You turned to him with a confident air. “I mean, how hard can it be? If I follow the recipe, I’m sure it’ll be fine. Can you get me the whisk?”

Todoroki stiffly handed it to you. “So, you’re not growing flowers?”

“No, just veggies, plants, and your aloe, at least once it warms up a bit more.”

“Where did those roses come from?” Todoroki inquired calmly; surely he was jumping to conclusions. Those flowers could’ve easily been from a relative out of the district, or even your father, who might be feeling guilty for leaving you by yourself so frequently. They were just roses, nothing to get suspicious about; he felt silly for even being irritated.

Your flushed face was hidden slightly as you turned back to the book; just the memory of what transpired earlier was giving you nervous butterflies as you scanned the page. “From this boy in my school; he’s an upperclassman….he said he knew I liked to grow plants, and he actually decided to grow them himself. He grew them inside his room and even spent his whole paycheck on a indoor plant lighting lamp.” you felt your chest burst with giddy warmth; you had never gotten a real confession before, let alone have a guy go through so much effort to give you a present. “I know Valentine’s day is pretty much over, but why not give him chocolates tomorrow?”

You cracked a few eggs and began whisking them together; the recipe called for premixed egg and vanilla. Once that was done, you began measuring out the flour and sugar.

“Oh no, I forgot to preheat the oven!” You turned around to set the timer and heat settings, eyebrows raised slightly as you noticed Todoroki slumped against the counter’s edge. He was just looking at the ground, his mouth set in a thin line.

“Shouto? If you’re tired, you don’t have to help me, I’ll be-”

“Was it something I did?” Todoroki cut you off quietly. “I...I know I’m not the most sociable person. I know I can be hard to talk to. I know I’ve upset you, but I thought I always made up for it. I thought we were okay. Why do you want to see someone else?”

You turned off the oven and stared at him in confusion. “I didn’t-do you think I’m mad at you? I’m not mad.”

“Is it my face?” he placed a hand over his burn hesitantly. "I thought you didn't mind it....no, you'd never be so shallow...but if there's no problem, then why is it a few days after you confess to me, you're going off and making chocolates for some guy you barely know?” Todoroki asked as he wiped his eyes with a embarrassed glare. “What is up with that? Doesn’t our engagement mean anything to you?!”

For a second you thought he was making a joke and you laughed. “Engagement? Our father’s called that off years ago; quit joking around, I need your help here.”

Todoroki’s eyes widened. “You said you loved me. You said I was your future husband.” he put a hand to his head; you had never seen him look so uncertain. “Was it a lie? Were you just stringing
“Shouto, w—we were just joking weren’t we?” Your voice cracked slightly as you stared at him. “I think you misunderstood me. I love you, but not that way. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make things weird. You’re my best friend—”

Todoroki stood up from the counter and padded over to the ingredients and the recipe book; he looked at them coldly as he raised his left hand and set them ablaze.

“Shouto, what are you doing?!” You didn’t dare try to yank away his arm for fear of getting burned; all you could do was watch as your food turned to ash and the pots took on a distorted, melted quality.

“I’m willing to make this work.” he answered as he finished the destruction and used his ice power to freeze the remains; it was all so quick, the smoke alarm didn’t even have time to go off. Todoroki turned to you with a strained smile. “I know you get lonely, but I’m here. You’ve always had me; whatever is making you think differently, just tell me about it and I’ll fix it.”

Before you could answer, he walked over to the sitting room and let his left hand hover over the red blooms with a peaceful smile. “I’m your fiance, I should be bringing you flowers, right? I’ll get you your favorite, whatever it is. If you’d like, we can grow some in your garden once the frost melts.”

You gasped as the charred petals fell to the floor; Todoroki went over to you, making sure to keep his still smoking hand away from your body.

“I didn’t even know about this guy...what a bastard, getting in the way of a man and his wife. It’s completely inappropriate.”

You stood your ground. “Shouto, I already told you how I felt. You can’t do this, I’m not actually your fiance! This is just nuts!”

“You’re being ridiculous; we’ve always been together. This guy, he’s just a distraction. He’s trying to come between us!” Todoroki backed you up against the wall, a wild look lurking beneath the shining eyes. “If he comes near you with anymore of these stunts, I’ll use my Quirk to turn his flesh to ash or to turn his skin to ice.”

You jerked back and hit your head against the wall as Todoroki raised his right palm and made icy designs crawl over his hand.

“Shouto, you don’t have to do that. You’re stronger than that, I know you!” You insisted desperately.

He stared and cocked his head to the side. “If you tell him about us, I won’t. As long as he doesn’t keep bothering you, there’s no need for me to do anything. After all, I want to become a pro and be able to support you; it’d be hard to do that with an unsavory record.”

He chuckled with warm eyes and patted your head affectionately, just like before.

You nodded and didn’t dare flinch or move away any further. “I’ll tell him, I swear. Just don’t-!” you accidentally let out a sob; you quickly covered your face, hoping he wouldn’t be upset at the sight of your tears.

Todoroki continued to rhythmically rub your head. “It’s okay, you don’t have to cry. I’m here. I always have been...” he kissed your temple and cracked a relieved smile. “I always will be.”
You fell into his shoulder; the one person who gave you comfort was the one making you sick. This thought made you sob harder. Todoroki just held you tighter with a patient smile.

“It’s going to be okay, I’m not mad at you. Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you cry....but what kind of man would I be if I couldn’t keep my future wife mine?”
“This is pointless.” Shu sighed; he was leaning back in his seat, earbuds firmly in place. You looked at him in disbelief.

“Is this coming from the guy who has to repeat their third year of high school?”

It really didn’t matter what you said; Shu seemed to be off in his own little world, eyes closed and perfectly at ease with wasting your time.

“Did you bring your textbook?” You asked.

“Nope.”

You walked over to stand in front of him, hands on your hips as you looked at him with a frown.

“Don’t you even care that you might fail and end up having to repeat the third year again?”

“Nope.”

That does it.

You tore out his earbuds with a frustrated huff; before you could say anything, Shu grabbed your wrist and glared at you through dull eyes.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he hissed.

As scared as you felt, you matched his glare eye for eye, trying to keep the tremble out of your tone. “Our teacher assigned me to help you with your studies.” You told him lowly. “We’re both stuck after school with each other until you start showing some improvement in your academics. The sooner you take this seriously, the sooner we can leave.”

Shu stared at you blankly; you honestly had no idea what he was thinking.

You sighed as he loosened his grip slightly. “Look, I know this kind of thing isn’t a big deal to you, but I also know you’re not stupid. If nothing else, put in some effort so you can get school over with.”

Shu sighed heavily; he never really understood why his father insisted he and his brothers enroll in this school. Night or day, it didn’t matter in his opinion; he just wanted to be left alone and not have to bother with something so useless to him.

“Has anyone ever told you how noisy you are?” Shu yawned and leaned back in his chair. “Let me borrow your textbook.”

“I need it too.” You protested; with a groan of frustration you moved your desk next to his. “We’ll just have to share today. Thank god I only have to help you with one subject.”

“Thank God, huh?” Shu looked at the open book, barely listening as you talked. “If only she knew. Humans are so clueless.” His eyes narrowed and he felt a distinct pain in his chest; why did every experience with a human end badly? “Weak, stupid humans...why can’t they just leave me alone?”

“Hey! Are you listening?” You had snapped your fingers in front of his face impatiently; Shu barely spared you a glance.
“No.”

You resisted the urge to roll your eyes. “Pay attention please. We only have so much time left; you shouldn’t even need my help with a simple chapter like this.”

“Fine.” he said shortly, straightening up slightly and training his gaze to the pages.

“It’s more trouble if I ignore her. If it means this will be over quicker, than I’ll just have to play along.” Shu began diligently taking notes; you stared in awe at the sudden change.

“Okay then.” You smiled brightly. “Let’s get to work.”

Shu told himself that he was only continuing these study sessions to get the school to stop pestering him, to protect his pride (Reiji would never let him hear the end of it if he had to repeat a grade for the third time), and to get you off his back.

It had nothing to with the way you encouraged him, or when you brought snacks and asked if he was getting enough sleep, or when you smiled proudly whenever he showed you a completed and passed assignment.

At least, that’s what he wanted to believe.

“Wow, you’re really good at this.” You grinned up at him as you looked over his translated worksheets. “I know the teacher didn’t ask me to help you because you weren’t smart.”

You continued to check off his sentences and compared them with the answers sheet. “Imagine what he could do if he actually had any motivation.”

Shu’s half lidded eyes widened slightly. “Asked?”

You looked up from the sheets. “What?”

“You said our teacher asked you to help me.” Shu began; you had never seen him look so perturbed.

“Well, yeah.” You said feeling a bit confused yourself. “He told me you were having issues with your school work, mainly in your writing class.”

“I thought you were assigned this.” Shu replied. “But if it was a request, you could’ve told him no, couldn’t you?”

You nodded. “Yes, that’s true…”

“Why did you say yes?”

“Well, I don’t see why not.” You thought for a moment. “To be honest, I was kind of confused. You seemed smart, always knew the answers when you were called on.” You looked down a bit self consciously. “The thing is, I thought it would be a waste if you had to repeat the class again. I just wanted to help.”

Shu averted his eyes and sighed wearily. “You really are ignorant.”

“What?” You said. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like.” Shu said; he groaned a bit and stretched as he stood up from his seat. He leaned over your shoulder and sniffed your hair lightly. “At least you smell nice.”
“Shu?!” You tried to move away but his hands held tight to your arms; he dipped his face to your neck. You yelled out as you felt the pain of his teeth sinking into your skin. “Get off!” You couldn’t even move your arms to push him away. “Shu, it hurts!”

“Hm.” Shu pulled away with a disgruntled frown. “You have no right to get mad. You made me this way after all.”

“You fucking bit me!!!” You thrashed around desperately as you felt a bit of blood trail down your neck; the mark was throbbing and you felt a light headed. “What the hell is wrong with you?! Why would you-?!”

“It should be obvious.” Shu sighed in exasperation. “I was feeding off you.” he licked his lips slowly. “What a rich flavor...not bad at all...”

“That’s not-” You stared at him fearfully. “Are you seriously trying to tell me you’re a vampire or something? You’re crazy!”

“Frankly, it doesn’t matter whether you believe me or not.” Shu chuckled quietly; his grip on your arms relaxed only for him to wrap his arms around you even more tightly.

“You did this to me...you reached out to me, you smiled at me.”

“Let me go, okay?” You tried to reason. “Someone will walk in any minute.”

Shu’s laugh was amused, almost merry. “I seriously doubt that. There’s barely that many students here during regular night classes, and most definitely not at this hour. Besides, if anyone tries to interrupt us, I’ll just kill them anyway.”

You stared at him unseeingly. “He can’t mean that...can he? This can’t be happening, this sort of thing isn’t real!”

Your struggling didn’t faze Shu in the slightest; to your shock, you noticed he was looking down at you with an expression easily described as affectionate.

“Humans really are so weak.” he said absently as he nuzzled your neck. “Still, your fighting this is getting a bit bothersome. Is it your pride?” his hand slowly went to pet your thigh under your uniform skirt. “Are you embarrassed to admit you like this?”

You tried to glare at him, but the pain in your neck was making you feel faint; it occurred to you that maybe it was from blood loss.

“You need to relax.” Shu lifted you up effortlessly; the world was blurred for only a second.

“What the-? How did we get here?!”

He was holding you in the middle of the music room; rumor was it was his own personal place. You had never given much thought to why the other students wouldn’t step foot in it.

“He can’t be that fast.” You felt your body tense up as the truth crashed over you.

“Here.” Shu slipped one of the buds into your ear; it played a soothing violin concerto; you stared up at Shu in horror as he carried you to a small couch in the corner of the room. He laid down on the cushions, making you lie on top of him; he smiled up at you and lazily nipped at your neck.

“We’ve been working nonstop. Break time.” Shu yawned; he was talking as if you had consented to
this impromptu snuggling session.

“Shu, I want to go home now.” You demanded; his eyes flipped open at your harsh tone.

“You’ll stay if I want you to.”

You grit your teeth as he began sucking your blood again, this time more roughly, your bodies practically molded together. The soft music played on, not aware of the brutal scene.

“You brought this on yourself; from the noises you’re making, I’m suspecting you’re enjoying this.” Shu’s apathetic expression turned to a smirk. “How lewd of you, tempting me with your whimpers. You’re practically begging me to suck you dry.”

“Shu, please.” You begged him feeling desperate. “Please, just let me go.”

“You started this.” Shu retorted. “I love you and you’re going to have to take responsibility for it.”

He pulled apart more so he could stare straight into your eyes.

“I should tell you right now, don’t underestimate me. If you try to run, it will be all too easy to chase you down and capture you. Not that you actually want to leave. I figured there was a reason you agreed to help me.” Shu chuckled. “If you admit to your little crush on me, I’ll be gentle. I’ll even let you sleep in my bed with me afterward.”

“I don’t even like you.” You glared; anger was building up through your fear. “I wouldn’t have agreed if I knew you were a monster.”

Shu didn’t like that one bit; he yanked your hair to the side and tore open your shirt. You squirmed in pain as he bit down just above your chest; after retracting his teeth, he lapped at the oozing blood with a satisfied smile.

“This is really happening you know.” Shu stated. “This isn’t a nightmare, even if you may feel it is; I’m only giving you the punishment you deserve for lying to me. If you stop being so stubborn, I can make it a dream. Just don’t think because I love you I’ll go easy on you when you’re being disobedient prey.”

You flinched as he gently cupped your face. “It’s been a long day. Let’s go to sleep.”

Shu made you rest your head on his chest; you couldn’t hear a heartbeat. He petted you slowly as he yawned. The music was fading into silence.

“Behave if you want to wake up again.”
Azusa Mukami

You tried not to stare at Azusa sitting a few seats ahead of you in class; you knew it was impolite and you knew if he caught you, it would be all too clear why you were staring, and then he might feel bad.

“But still, he looks so sad.” You thought as you glanced back at him; he was at a diagonal angle, and you could just see the side of his face. You could still see the end of the scar that bridged Azusa’s nose.

 Truthfully, you felt queasy at the idea someone had intentionally slashed him right across the face; he didn’t seem like a delinquent by any means, so you automatically assumed maybe it was from a bully or maybe even an abusive parent or something. It didn’t help that there were two more, one on his neck and another on his cheek. The bandages did not help the look of a vulnerability.

You felt a morbid sort of curiosity along with your sympathy. “I wonder what happened.”

To your mortification, Azusa turned to face you; you blinked and looked down at your book quickly, feeling your cheeks burn a bit from shame. The rest of the class was spent with your eyes firmly trained on your desk. When the bell signaled the start of lunch, you bolted up from your seat to the hallway and up to the roof, unaware of someone following you.

“Excuse me.”

You turned halfway to look at Azusa, just as you reached the rooftop; the areas were slit dimly by the street lights and the half moon suspended in the night sky. You felt a chill unexplainably go down your spine.

“You’re the new student, right? Why were you staring at me?” Azusa didn’t look offended; if anything, he looked mildly curious.

“I’m very sorry.” You began. “I really didn’t mean to, it’s just…”

“Is it my scars?”

“Great job.” You told yourself as you nodded at him apologetically. “You’ve probably made him feel like crap, just because you couldn’t mind your own business.”

“Do you...like them?”

You had to keep your jaw from dropping in shock as Azusa smiled almost bashfully; he traced a finger lovingly across the scar on his nose.

“I was wondering how you got hurt…” You said carefully.

Azusa’s smile didn’t falter. “From my old friends.”

“You’re friends?!” You asked in disbelief. “What kind of friends would do that?”

“My best friends.” Azusa continued. “They were so happy when they hurt me. They were showing me how much they loved me. Isn’t that wonderful?” his smile turned to a confused stare. “You seemed upset when you were staring at me. Why?”

You couldn’t decide whether you felt more angry or pitying. “I guess I was worried. I thought
maybe you were being bullied. They look painful…” you trailed off.

“You were worried about me?”

“Mukami-kun, maybe it’s none of my business, but I don’t see how hurting other people means you love them. When you care about someone, the last thing you want to do is hurt them.” You tried to make him see reason; you were suddenly feeling very protective of him “God, what has he been through to make him think this way? It’s so fucked up...it’s not right.”

Azusa was still looking at you; his borderline emotionless expression was puzzled.

“I don’t understand.’ he told you quietly; he seemed a bit upset. You decided to approach this careful.

“Well, when you care about someone, you want to be nice to them. You share things with them, you talk to them politely, you protect them, and you take care of them.” You explained; Azusa seemed so much like a child, his head cocked and his body curled up as he sat down next to you.

“But it feels good to be hurt.” he said. “It makes me feel alive…”

You frowned slightly, a wave of sadness washed over you.

“What can I say? Should I just drop it? He doesn’t seem to get it at all; still, to think that way…but this isn’t getting us anywhere.”

“Bunny.”

“Huh?” You looked up at him; he blinked slowly as he studied you.

“My big brother Yuma caught one once to make stew when we were little; it looked scared, with big eyes.” Azusa seemed lost in a memory. “It tasted good though. You kind of remind me of a bunny.”

“Oh.” You weren’t sure what else to say. “Um, lunch is almost over. We should get going.” you stood up and he followed your lead. “Mukami-kun, I hope I wasn’t prying.”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.” Azusa said lowly; he looked a bit nervous suddenly. “Can we come here tomorrow and talk more?”

You smiled a bit. “If you want to. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Kay.”

The next day, you decided to bring Azusa a little surprise.

“Mukami-kun.” You greeted him as you made your way to the rooftop. “I hope you don’t mind, I-what are you doing!!”

Azusa was sitting in the same spot as yesterday, but he was holding up his arm, gently dragging the tip of a shiny dagger down the pale skin. You nearly dropped your bag as you rushed forward, trying to tear the knife from his hands.
“Stop!” You cried out; Azusa looked at you blankly, but lowered his hand.

“I missed you.” Azusa said plainly. “You’re late...I didn’t think you were coming.”

“That’s no reason to-to-” You could hardly say it; you shook your head in disbelief and went through you bag hurriedly. After a second, you pulled out the role of bandages; it was decorated with bunnies.

“What are you doing?”

You didn’t look up as you began wrapping the bandages around his cut. “You shouldn’t have done this.”

Azusa looked down at his freshly bandaged arm dazedly.

“But it felt nice.” Azusa smiled. “I can make you feel nice too.” he picked up the dagger and took a hold of your arm. “Can I?”

“No!” You practically screamed as you wrung your arm from his grip; your fear faltered at the anguish that flitted through his eyes.

“Aren’t we friends?”

“Yes, we are, but hurting me isn’t the way to prove it.” You wished he could just see reason, just be normal and understand why this was wrong. You wondered if maybe you should tell a teacher or something.

“Okay, I won’t if you don’t want me to.” Azusa stood up suddenly. “Excuse me, but I should get going. Will I see you here tomorrow at lunch?”

“O-okay.”

The next day, you were wondering if it was such a good idea to meet up with Azusa again.

“Hey, wake up!” One of your friends playfully tapped your shoulder. “Man, you’re such an airhead.”

“Oh, leave me alone.” You grumbled; the last thing you needed was him bugging you. You had to figure out this issue.

Your friend pouted somewhat. “Whoa, mean too. You know, it’s gonna be really hard to find a boyfriend when you keep making that face.”

“Shut up!” You told him; you kicked his shin and he yelped in pain. Your glare narrowed as he continued to laugh as he held his leg.

“Violent too! You know, you could’ve broken my shin bone with that kick.” he teased; you raised a fist irritably.

“If you don’t shut it, I’m gonna do way worse.”

The two of you and most of the other students jumped when they heard the classroom door slam shut.
“Azusa?” You wondered; you were certain he was just about to walk in.

Regardless of any wary feelings, you went up to the school’s roof at lunchtime; Azusa was there, curled up in his usual position and frowning sadly at his feet.

“Mukami-kun?” You said softly. “Are you okay?’

Azusa looked up at you; you had never seen such woeful eyes on a person before.

“Do you not like me?”

“No, of course I like you.” You told him. “Where’s this coming from?”

“You wouldn’t...that guy, you kicked him, but you wouldn’t do that to me!” Tears welled up in the corners of his eyes; the sense of betrayal was overwhelming. “I thought she loved me! How could she, she knows I wanted that!”

“He was being an annoying jerk!” You said. “I told you before, I would never hurt someone I cared about.”

Azusa’s tears stopped suddenly. “You mean it?”

You nodded fervently with a reassuring smile; it seemed like he was finally understanding. Azusa smiled back ever so softly as he pulled out his bag and unzipped it. He searched almost frantically through it and finally lifted out a delicate knife with an ornate handle.

“That’s okay then. You poor thing.” Azusa cooed as he approached you; you gasped in pain as he grabbed your arm. You had no idea someone so frail looking could have that kind of strength. “I’ll have to teach you better. I’ll try not to make it too much for you to handle. We’ll start slow and work our way up.”

Without warning Azusa cut your palm swiftly, blood already dripping down your wrist. You cringed as he licked the drops with a blissful expression.

“You have your own way of expressing love; I thought about it and decided on a compromise.” Azusa said as he held your stinging arm. “After we hurt each other we can patch each other up too!”

At first Azusa was a bit reluctant with your ideas, but you were so sweet to him, so kind, so he wouldn’t mind bending a few rules for you. You just wanted to make sure he was safe; they way you hit that other boy didn’t mean anything. It was like swatting at a fly, not like the pain you would learn to bestow upon him.

“I can’t wait to feel it.” Azusa’s skin tingled at the very image of you lovingly caressing him with one of his own knives and tending to the wounds you would make on him afterward. “And then she can give me a kiss to help it heal and then we’ll do it all over again! Over and over and over!”

“A-Azusa.” You sobbed. “Don’t do this, please.”

“But I love you.” Azusa whispered. “I know this is a new experience for us both, but we’ll learn together.”

You found yourself shaking violently as he traced the knife’s blade up and down your neck, leaving thin red lines behind; he thought they looked stunning on your skin.
“You look just like a scared bunny. I’m sorry for frightening you, but you just look so adorable in pain.” Azusa kissed your cheek, a high blush on his cheeks. “I could just eat you right up.”
“Hey seed lady, I need your help.”

You tried to refrain from grimacing as Yuma entered your shop with his usual boisterous demeanor.

“What now?”

“I can’t decide on what flowers to grow for my garden.”

It was genuinely surprising to find out this man would be into such a slow and patience commanding task as gardening, but you supposed even delinquent types like him had hobbies. Before today, Yuma had only purchased seeds, topsoil, and tools when his own were too worn to use any longer. You were a bit puzzled at his new request.

“Why are you growing flowers? I thought you only grew food.” You asked curiously; Yuma scoffed as if your question wasn’t even worth answering.

“Just make a suggestion; it better be good too.” Yuma stomped over to you, heedless of how the other customers slowly backed away as he came closer. You had learned by now that their fear was unwarranted; despite all his bluster, Yuma had never raised a hand to you, and even if his tone was less than courteous, he always brought you fresh veggies and fruits for your trouble.

“Well, we have a pretty nice selection this year. The asters and daisies are easy to maintain.”

Yuma frowned thoughtfully. “Nah, those are boring.”

“Okay.” You looked around the nursery. “How about sweet peas? They smell really good and they grow like weeds once you give them the proper care. It should be easy for someone with a green thumb like you.”

Yuma averted his gaze. “I want special flowers.”

“Special?”

“That’s what I said.” Yuma replied defensively.

You looked around at the variety of flowers in confusion. “Well, what do you consider special? I need a bit more to go off on.”

“I don’t know, just...” Yuma replied; he actually looked a bit anxious. “What do you like?”

You smiled. “Oh, I love all kinds of flowers. That’s why I started this shop in the first place you know.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep!” You grinned as you switched on the water sprinklers above the marigolds; it was a hot day out and they looked ready to wilt. The sun was making you sweat a bit; you didn’t notice as Yuma watched a bead of sweat roll down your neck and down your chest.

“Well, what kind of flowers do most girls like to get from guys?”

“He’s wants to grow flowers for a girl? Oh that’s so sweet!” You inwardly giggled in amusement.
“Who knew he could be so romantic?”

“Well, have you heard of the language of the flowers?” You asked him; Yuma shook his head. “Not really. What’s that?”

“You see, certain flowers have a specific meaning when you give them to someone. Take these petunias for example.” You gestured to the little colorful flowers. “If you gave them to someone, they could mean either you’re angry at them or you enjoy their company.”

“Why the hell would I give anything to someone I hate; heh, aside from a punch to the face.” Yuma chuckled; you stared at him dully.

“It’s an old fashioned way to send someone a message. Now,” You led him to the roses. “Typically, roses are the best flowers for relationships. Red means passionate love, yellow means friendship, pink means gratitude or first love, and white means pure love.” You gestured to the pink primroses blooming brightly in the sunlight. “A primrose means ‘I can’t live without you’.”

Yuma pointed to the happy looking daffodils. “What about those?”

“Those mean unrequited love.”

“I don’t want those!”

“Okay, okay.” You said soothingly; Yuma glared at the flower, feeling even farther away from a choice.

“I don’t know any of this stuff.” Yuma groaned; you looked at him sympathetically. Not only was he a valued customer, but he really did seem like a good person. Yuma really seemed to care about getting it right…

“Hey, how about I come over later and bring you my book of flower meanings?” You offered. “I’ll help you pick one out and I’ll let you use my employee discount if you give me some more of those cherry tomatoes.”

Yuma visibly perked up. “Yeah? You’d do that?!”

“Sure, why not?”

The next day you were blown away.

“Holy shit, is this really his house?!” You stared up at the huge mansion; you stood next to Yuma, who had met you not far along the road to your destination.

“Cool huh? The best part is I’ve got the whole garden area to myself.” Yuma bragged. “I’ll show it to you sometime, but right now you’re coming up to my room. I got a surprise for ya!”

You found yourself dragged through the mansion; to be precise, Yuma had actually picked you up, running all the way to his room with an almost victorious grin. You clung to him for dear life.
“How the-aren’t I heavy?!” You asked as he dumped you on his bed unceremoniously; he went about rifling through his closet for something.

“Yeah, but I’m not some weakling.” Yuma laughed; he came back to you with a cardboard box. It had holes in the top and was partially opened. “Here.”

Yuma took out a bunch of red camellias; they were woven together in a crown and placed gently on your head. You stared up at them and back at him in confusion.

“For me?”

Yuma smirked. “Nice right? These were already growing in our garden, but I’ll start growing them especially for you later. I was looking up stuff on that flower language thing myself.”

“Wait...you wanted to give me flowers?” You felt your face heat up as he sat down next to you; it suddenly occurred to you that you were sitting on a boy’s bed...alone. You hadn’t really noticed until then how much Yuma towered over you.

“...yeah. You like them?”

You took off the flower crown carefully; they were beautiful. “Yes, but I-”

You screamed as Yuma pinned you to the bed, smirking wildly; he was leaning over, sniffing your hair.

“Damn, you smell like flowers.” Yuma groaned and pulled you close. “You don’t have to hold back with me you know. I don’t like beating around the bush.”

“Yuma.” You tried to squirm away. “They’re nice and all, but I don’t feel the same way. I thought I was helping you with another girl; if I had known, I wouldn’t have come here!”

He stared down at you, brows furrowing in confusion. He couldn’t believe what you were saying; he was sure you liked him back. After all, you were always so nice to him, never shrunk away when he came into the shop and always offered your help with a bright smile. He knew it was because you were happy to see him, so why were you being so weird now?

Yuma looked into your eyes searchingly; there was no joy in them, just apprehension and slight fear. Your big, gentle eyes, like the ones of a calf; he didn’t like the way they were looking at him now. It pissed him off.

“Yuma, are you okay?”

“No!” Yuma replied angrily; he grit his teeth; he was in so much pain and you were just making it worse. There was only one way to make it better. You moaned in pain as he smashed his lips onto yours, his kiss aggressive and sloppy.

“You led me on!” Yuma stared down at you accusingly; he tore the flowers from your hair, scattering them around the room. “That’s not fair, not when all I ever did was try to show you how much I love you.”

You tried uselessly to pull away as he attacked your neck with harsh bites and sucks; his teeth actually pierced the skin and from what you could feel, Yuma was licking up the blood.

“I’m gonna have to get you on a better diet.” Yuma stated plainly. “Make your blood healthy; it tastes weak.” Despite his criticism, he looked downright intoxicated. “Still...I want more. It’s never
enough, you have to give me everything!”

You shrieked in pain as his fangs dug in deeper; at this point you had ceased struggling, the movement only serving to make him angrier, his hold bruising, and his teeth cause more damage. You stared desolately at the petals of the camellia strewn about the floor; if memory served you right, it meant, ‘you’re a flame in my heart’. It was fitting for someone as passionate as Yuma.

He licked up your neck and kissed you more gently. “Shit, don’t look so scared. I’m not gonna eat you. What good would that do, when there’s so many other ways I can enjoy you?”

Yuma laid down beside you, his toned arms holding you firmly against him; you were nowhere strong enough to break the embrace and you were a bit scared to try.

“What are you going to do?” You whispered fearfully; Yuma laughed and flicked your nose teasingly.

“I’m gonna keep you of course. You can help me out with the garden; you’ll get fresh fruits and vegetables everyday, and flowers too if you want.” Yuma told you lowly; his hands trailed up and down your legs lightly. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

A shiver went down your spine and the hair’s on the back of your neck and arms stood at attention; Yuma seemed to notice and felt a bit bad for scaring you. He didn’t want you to hate him; he just wanted to make sure you knew what you were, where you stood in this relationship.

Without waiting for your reply, Yuma kissed you; he pulled back with a roguish smile.

“Don’t worry, I promise I won’t get too rough.”
“Laito..he was…” You clamped a hand down on your mouth to keep yourself silent; you carefully scuttled down the hallway, certain that neither him or his mother had seen you.

You wished you hadn’t seen it; no mother is supposed to hold her son’s face that way, she’s not supposed to grip his chin and pull his lips down to-

“Stop it, stop it, stop it!” You shook your head violently trying to erase the image. You really shouldn’t have been that shocked; in the world of vampires, incest and even marriages to relatives wasn’t truly uncommon. In fact, in wealthier and older families like the Sakamaki’s, it was encouraged to keep the bloodlines pure. Still, you and everyone in the household was well aware of Cordelia’s supposedly clandestine affair with her husband’s brother; to think she’d even do such a thing with her own son…

“It’s not my place to think on it.” You took a calming breath; the shock had worn off, though you couldn’t help feel a bit sick, not to mention pity.

Laito’s cheeks were flushed in the near darkness. “I love you.”

That’s what he had said; Cordelia merely smiled coyly with cold eyes, not shining with the warmth her partner’s possessed. It was obvious Laito was being used.

Over the next few weeks, you couldn’t help repeating the scene in your mind when your thoughts were unoccupied.

“Sick.” You muttered lowly as you took your broom and duster to the next room; there wasn’t much to clean besides dust. It wasn’t as if the Sakamaki’s had regularly company. In fact, you didn’t even see that much of them; surely they felt no need to socialize with a mere human servant.

You began carefully dusting off a antique statue of one of their ancestors. “Fine by me.”

“What is?”

Laito stood in the doorway, his hat cocked jauntily to the side.

“Oh, nothing Laito-san.” You bowed respectfully. “I was just talking to myself.”

“Tell me, do you prefer talking to yourself instead of others?” Laito tilted his head as he smiled teasingly, the tips of his canines on full display.

“It’s not like that, I just do it to fill the void of silence now and then…”

“I see. It must be lonely, you spend much of your time here all by your lonesome.”

It wasn’t that shocking that he appeared right beside you out of nowhere; you were no stranger to Laito’s antics, though this was a bit different than childish pranks. Currently his very adult face was close enough to touch your own.

“What about-?!” You shut your mouth so fast your teeth clacked together; Laito’s smile dropped as he eyed you curiously.

“About what my adorable slave?”
“Slave?” You asked absently; he just grinned.

“Well, to be exact, you are our servant; of course, you could take up other duties, ones much more fun than cleaning up dust and grime.” Laito put a finger under your jaw lightly, the cold from his touch making the hair on your arms stand up. “Now, what were you saying? There’s no reason to hesitate because of your status, it hardly matters to me.”

You averted your gaze nervously. “Forgive me Laito-san, it’s just...not long ago when I was going to clean Cordelia-san’s chamber, I saw you two together...I haven’t told anyone about it, please believe me, I didn’t mean to see anything-”

“Now, now, there’s no need to get so bent out of shape!” Laito was doubled over and holding his stomach; you had to admit, he looked oddly sweet. “Besides, it’s not as if there’s anyone to gossip to...well, there’s nothing to even gossip about now I’m afraid.”

He smiled brightly at your confused stare. “My dear mother is no longer alive. I and my brothers took the liberty of ending her pathetic existence.”

You were at a loss for words; oddly enough, he seemed to be too as he plopped down on the nearest chair.

“I was merely her toy.” Laito admitted with a sigh. “But isn’t that an honor in and of itself, to use and be used by your beloved?”

“Don’t say that Laito-san.” You said softly. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“And you don’t yourself?”

Your brow furrowed as you felt further confused; did all vampires have such unorthodox views on emotions and relationships?

“I’ve always believed…” You scratched your head lightly. “When you love someone, you care about them. They’re not tools for you to use or people to be thrown away whenever it’s convenient. You want to share your life with them.”

“Wow, I didn’t think you were this naive.”

“Pardon me Laito-san, but I don’t see how wanting to be treated with respect is naive.” You couldn’t help sounding insulted; after all, he was the one who seemed to be delusional. “You deserve much better out of life than to be used by anyone. If you didn’t believe it yourself, why would you kill Cordelia-san? Why not do anything in your power to protect her instead?” Your voice softened a bit at his blank face. “Don’t you understand Laito-san?”

He groaned as he slowly rose from his seat. “You talk a lot too; the way you babble is a bit appealing though. It makes me wonder how vocal you are in bed.”

You blushed instantly. “Were you even listening to what I was saying?!?”

“Oh yes.” Laito smirked. “I heard you loud and clear. If you’ll excuse me, I have business to attend to my sweet. Don’t mind me, continue with your duties like a good girl.”

“I’ll never understand these people.” You sighed lightly as you turned back to your chore: Laito stopped to watch you for a moment before exiting the room.

“That’s the first time she didn’t address me so stuffily.”
The thought made him inexplicably giddy as he helped his brothers bury his ex-lover’s corpse.

“The hell are you so happy about?” Ayato grumbled.

Kanato held his teddy as he watched his brothers work; he kept petting it’s head, whispering softly.

“Oh Ayato, so young and innocent.” Laito chuckled as he lifted yet another shovel full of dirt on top of the now covered hole; he hoped his mother suffocated if she had any life left in her ugly, shriveled body.

“Tch, just shut up and help yours truly finish this damn thing.” Ayato stabbed the spade of his shovel into the soft dirt with a petty scowl. “The bitch.”

“Wow, it’s so nice out.” You leaned against the window sill; you meant to go straight to bed on time, but the moon was full and there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. One thing you enjoyed about your employment was the scenery; you couldn’t see the stars shine this brightly in the city or the way the moonlight seemed to nearly blaze like the sun, its rays casting the world in a soft glow.

“Talking to yourself again?” Laito was lying back on your bed, eyeing the full moon appreciatively. “How precious.”

“Laito?” You straightened up and gave him your rapt attention. “Is there something I can help with?”

“You should rest during the day.” Laito ignored your inquiry. “If you did, you could stay up at night and we could enjoy each other’s company. As a matter of fact, I’m certain I would be able to tire you out enough to where you spend the whole day passed out on this bed.” his own eyes flickered with want as he yanked you down on top of him. “How about we try it?”

“Laito, this is indecent, get out of my room!” You tried to twist your arms from his hands, but your strength was no match for his hold.

“I don’t think you really want me to leave.” Laito giggled, his cheeks flushed pink as he switched positions and had you halfway pinned under him. “You should know by now, the full moon only makes us stronger. Do you like it?” he pressed his face into your neck and inhaled with a moan. “I think you do. I think you like how I can hold you here under me and all you can do is squirm and beg.”

“I-I-”

“You love me?” Laito finished. “I know, I love you too my sweet. To think…” he wrapped his arms around you, his whole frame pressing into yours firmly. “All this time, I could’ve spent my time loving you, worshipping this lovely body, piercing your soft skin with my fangs over and over. I’ve never even tasted you before!”
You winced and jerked as his teeth pricked the juncture between your shoulder and neck; it wasn’t too painful.

“Shh, since it’s your first time, I’ll be careful.” Laito breathed as he suckled the rising droplet of blood. “It’s good….so good…”

“Laito!” You kicked your legs feebly, the only part of your body you could even move, but the movement felt like nothing to him as he fed. You could hear the slight rustling of cloth as his hips gently rocked against you.

“I can’t stop.” Laito nuzzled the nape of your neck and kissed you; it was so chaste, you could hardly believe it was from him. He pulled back with a deceptively sympathetic look. “I won’t ever stop. I love you; are you scared you’ll become my toy? How silly, of course you aren’t, at the least you’re the only toy I’ll ever need.” he smiled down at you adoringly. “I’ll take care of you until the sun begins to rise and share everything I have, until you’re too overwhelmed to even stay conscious. By the end of this night, my love will be imprinted on your heart and soul and you’ll never want me to stop.”

You gasped as he licked a trail up your neck, smearing the remaining blood faintly.

“So my sweet, where should I start?”
“Don’t touch my teddy you stupid cow!”

Kanato scratched your hand as you reached to take his toy; one arm was barely hanging by the seams. Honestly, you were far more surprised that the bear had suffered any damage, Kanato was so obsessed with it and guarded it as if it were made of flesh and blood.

You withdrew your hand, but didn’t make a move to leave the sitting room. “Kanato-san, teddy is injured. A noble pureblood vampire may not need medical attention, but teddy must be seen to. I am your servant after all and it’s my duty to see anything that needs fixing and attending to is taken care of.”

You finished this statement with a submissive bow; if there was one thing children liked was to be indulged and despite Kanato’s age, he was still a child in most aspects. On top of all that, no one in the Sakamaki household would be pleased at the tantrum of epic proportions that would soon commence.

Kanato was still frowning, but at his bear’s torn arm; in fact, he looked ready to cry as he thrust his companions into your arms.

“You better heal him well and fast. If you don’t I’ll get mad.”

“Yes Kanato-san.” You sat down on an armchair near the fire for for better lighting; you set teddy down gently as possible on your lap and pulled out the thread and needle. It was a simple stitch and took you all of a minute to finish; as soon as you snapped the thread, Kanato took his bear back, but with noticeably less force.

“Teddy! Oh wow,” Kanato took a moment to really look over the stitched up arm. “It’s like it never ripped.”

You smiled; he looked so sweet at the moment, you could almost forget what a real terror he was. “I’m glad to hear that Kanato-san.” you bowed. “I have to see to the chores, but please, don’t hesitate to ask for my assistance if you deem it necessary.”

“Thank you very much.” Kanato stared you down with eyes as manic as his smile; you wished you could say receiving a smile from him was heartwarming, but…

“If there was a god, he wouldn’t keep finding new ways to scare the crap out of me.” You commented absently as you took a damp wash cloth to the antique shelves; even so, you found yourself smiling lightly as you moved on to the portrait frames. “Still, Kanato-san did seem happy.”

“Aren’t you just the sweetest maid.”

“You know Laito-san, after all these years, it’s not that surprising when you show up out of nowhere.” This time you bumped into his chest and pouted slightly up at him. “You may be practically infallible, but one of these days I’m going to trip or something and hurt myself.”

“Did you enjoy that?” Laito asked; his usual easy smile was forced. “Did it send your heart racing when he smiled at you? You practically jumped at the chance to assist him.”

You flinched as Laito cupped your cheek. “What?”
His eyes were cold as he stared down at you pitilessly. “Do you prefer my brother to me?”

“I just fixed his bear” You replied in disbelief; you didn’t understand, Laito was the last person you would ever expect to be jealous; as a matter of fact, he frequently made suggestions to let a third party join on your trysts. He made it clear that nothing would thrill him more than to watch you come undone, only to return back to him in the end. It was his idea of romantic.

“Laito, I’m not interested in your brother...I mean, I’m surprised you’d even care if I did…” You couldn’t seem to look at him straight; he was really starting to unnerve you.

“You are the one who said love was sharing your life with someone, to not use them, did you not?” Laito persisted softly as he pushed you to the sofa. “So hypocritical of you to give away your smile, your gaze so generously to anyone.”

You grit your teeth as he chomped down on your neck; it had never been this painful before. You could feel a steady stream of blood ooze out from the incision and drip into a small stain on the couch cushion.

Laito pulled back with a satisfied moan and licked his canines. “What a bad maid, soiling the furniture...I’ll just have to take you right here as punishment.”

“You can’t-Laito, you can’t be serious, what if someone-?!”

“Sees us?” Laito finished. “Good. If they didn’t get the memo before, they’ll know now who you really belong to, your true master.” he suckled the bit of skin next to the wound he inflicted.

You gripped his shoulders, your fingernails piercing his skin through the cloth, but he couldn’t feel anything except the warmth coursing through his veins as he lapped at your neck. You gasped as he grabbed your thighs to wrap them around his waist.

Laito smiled and rested his forehead against yours. “I love you and I’ll teach you to love this pain and pleasure.”
There it was, so close in your grasp, so near. You felt your heart jump a bit in your chest as you made to grab the lone book off of the shelf with a wide grin.

A hand nearly knocked into yours during the movement; you looked over at the hand's owner with a startled frown.

“Oh my.” he smiled with a mixture of apology and amusement. “It seems we both want the last copy. What a predicament.”

You were just about to take the remastered, hardcover copy of Romeo and Juliet for your own; it was the last one in the bookstore, though admittedly, this man’s presence was a bit of a distraction at the moment.

“Wow. He looks like someone from a movie or a model.” You thought as you tried to calm your nerves, yet at the same time you didn’t feel particularly intimidated; he was smiling gently at you, relaxed and cordially.

“Ah, I’m sorry.” You honestly weren’t sure why you were apologizing; regardless, the man waved it away with a light smile.

“Nonsense. May I ask why you wanted this book?”

“Why?” You echoed.

He nodded and then slapped his forehead lightly before giving you a small bow. “Forgive me, I should have introduced myself first. My name is Makishima Shogo; pleasure to meet what I presume is another fan?”

You smiled politely. “Yeah, I’ve been dying to get my own copy for a long time.”

Makishima cocked his head to the side curiously. “Oh? If you don’t mind me asking, why did you decide to get one today?”

You smiled up at him; you had never met someone your age who was so polite and well spoken, not to mention with an interest in books.

“Well, I first got into the story during my English class.” You explained. “The problem is, we were only studying certain parts of the text, and I didn’t get the time to read the whole thing.”

Makishima studied you intently. “I must say, I’m impressed. Most people your age don’t read much at all, let alone a book with such confusing language.”

You shrugged and stuffed your hands into your pockets a bit self consciously. “Oh, it's not very impressive. It was a bit hard to understand at first, but the more I read, the easier it was to understand. I just fell in love with the language; no matter what the characters talked about, it just sounds so poetic.” You chuckled, deciding it was best to cut your ramble short. “Well, I guess that’s the whole point, but you know what I mean.”

“What was your favorite part?”

You grinned. “The part where Friar Laurence tells off Romeo for getting over Rosaline so easily; it’s
just so funny, even in that old language, you can tell he’s just really cutting into him.”

Makishima’s stare was contemplative; he himself had never paid much attention to the humor in the story. “Did it amuse you? Didn’t the story make you sad?”

“A little bit, but mostly I found myself thinking, ‘wow, these people are dumb.’ So much stuff could’ve been avoided if they stopped to think or if they didn’t just jump into things.” You said, feeling more and more enthusiastic about the conversation. “I guess then there wouldn’t be a story, not to mention at the time marriages could be made without people ever even speaking to each other.”

“The play was meant to be somewhat of a satire than an outright tragedy.” Makishima supplied. “The overall character archetypes and plot line had been used quite frequently in Shakespeare’s previous works. Many people theorize he wanted to put a spin on them, leading to a majority of the characters being portrayed as foolish or one dimensional in the play.”

“The whole thing seemed so ridiculous when I first heard about it.” You admitted. “Two teenagers getting carried away with what they think is love and end up dying over it.”

Makishima blinked as your skeptical smile softened and you sighed lightly.

“Still, the script was so romantic. The speech Romeo makes when he first sees Juliet got stuck inside my head since the first time I read it. It sounded so profound and poetic, like he may as well have been singing it.”

Your smile faltered as Makishima leaned in toward you.

“Oh, she doth teaches the torches to burn bright! It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night, like an Ethiop’s ear, beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear.” Makishima recited softly; you found yourself fixed to spot by his adamantine gaze.

To your shock, Makishima took a hold of your hand; his lips just barely brushed against the knuckle as he spoke, the words coming out with a natural elegance. You were positive he would have been an actor had he been born in Shakespeare’s time.

“So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows, as yonder lady o’er her fellow shows.” Makishima’s calm expression was broken by the slight rising of the corner of his lips. “The measure done, I’ll watch her place of stand, and, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand.”

“What is he doing?” You felt the back of your neck burn as he stared into your eyes; his own were swimming with emotion. As taken off guard as you were, you couldn’t bring yourself to snap out of the trance he had put you under. “Is he trying to be funny?”

“Did my heart love til now? Forswear it sight!” Makishima graced you with a smile with so much allure that Shakespeare himself would have trouble finding words to describe it. “I ne’er saw true beauty until this night.”

You stared at him like a deer caught in head light’s.

“Uh...what?”

“That’s the whole monologue, right? It’s quite ingenious, a simple series of couplets memorable and charming enough to be remembered centuries later.” Makishima dropped your hand unceremoniously. “Here.”
You continued to stare in surprise as he handed the book to you firmly.

“Thank you!” You smiled brightly, nearly forgetting the awkward scene that had transpired; at first you assumed he was trying to make you uncomfortable, but he must not have been a bad person if he was so generous to give you the very last copy of a book he clearly enjoyed just as much as you.

“On one condition.” Makishima added pleasantly. “You meet me tomorrow for tea. It’s rare to find a fellow bookworm. I’d love to pick your brain; I’d say now, but I have some business to attend to.”

You held the book lovingly and blushed ever so slightly. “Okay. There’s a cafe just a few blocks over. Would you like to meet up at the same time today?”

“That sounds perfect.” Makishima nodded; he waved and took off.

“What a smart girl.” he thought idly; a shiver of excitement crept over him as he walked on. “I wonder if I can enlighten her...”

“So, what is your favorite book genre?”

You sat across from Makishima, sipping your tea with a sincerely interested expression; he smiled back, his own drink untouched. The weather was a bit warm for hot tea, but to you it felt so soothing along with your new friend’s presence. He had ended up inviting you to his own apartment and you hoped you didn’t seem too nervous.

“I’ve read several different kinds. I suppose my favorites are ones that make me think. Dystopian societies are particularly interesting. After all, we’re living in one aren’t we?” his casual tone had a harsh edge; you had never heard him speak in such a way. “Tell me.....how are you feeling right now?”

“What do you mean?” Your brow furrowed slightly; this conversation was taking an odd turn. For the past few weeks you had been meeting up with Makishima to discuss books and other trivial things. It was routine by now, and he had never asked such a vague question before.

“How are you feeling? Relaxed, bored, content? If you’re not sure, your crime coefficient will be able to tell you with the utmost accuracy.” Makishima’s laugh was distinctly bitter.

You clutched at your cup. “You should be careful Makishima-san.” you said anxiously, looking around briefly. The sight made him laugh harder.

“You see? Simply criticizing it makes people fear punishment. It’s sickening, isn’t it?”

You didn’t know how he could remain so calm; he was obviously feeling very negative emotions at the moment.

“A-aren’t you scared your number will go up?” You asked.

Makishima smiled playfully. “Are you concerned for me? How sweet.” This time his laugh was warm as you blushed slightly. He shook his head in disappointment and stared down at his cup.
“Scared, huh? That’s just it; people are living in fear of the Sybil System, if you can call this living.”

“I suppose you have a good point. Honestly, I try not to think of it...” You stared down at your hands. “I just try to live a good life, try to be a good person and hope it all works out.”

“Humans should be free to do as they please.” Makishima said softly; he reached across the table and took your hand in his. Your head jerked up in surprise.

“This isn’t freedom; harm or help, kill or sustain, give or take, humans should be able to do whatever they want, spend their days doing what they desire, whatever the outcome.” Makishima’s thumb ran over your knuckles tenderly. “There’s beauty in savagery, there’s peace in suffering; without pain, there wouldn’t be pleasure.”

You felt your skin go cold. “What in the world is he saying?!?”

“I live by that way myself.” Makishima smiled placidly. “I am what the Sibyl System classifies as criminally asymptomatic. No matter what I do, say, or feel, my coefficient can not be identified.”

You were surprised to see a bit of what could be described as sadness in his tone, yet the smile never left his face. In fact, it grew a bit wider as he stared into your eyes.

“I’m lucky though, since I can feel things very passionately without worry.” Makishima’s hand tightened over yours. “Do you believe in love at first sight?”

“I-I don’t think so.” You replied; he was already beginning to make you on edge and now this? You pulled back your hand slightly and drank your tea, trying to cover up your unease.

“I suppose it’s a bit much to comprehend. I bet you’ve spent your whole life making sure your hue doesn’t get out of control, making sure you don’t let your emotions run away with you. What a shame.”

For some reason Makishima’s gentle smile became slightly blurred; you put a hand to your head, as if it would help steady you.

“Ah, the drug should be taking effect by now.” Makishima commented; his tone was ecstatic. “Don’t worry about keeping your fear under control; the tranquilizer will mellow you out anyhow, and by the time Sybil gets a reading on you, we’ll be long gone.”

Before you could fall from your seat, Makishima’s arms were holding you up steadily; he brushed some hair from your face. “When the revolution starts, I want you by my side.”

“Makishima-san....no...” You pleaded weakly; you felt numb all over and your vision was fading fast.

Makishima laughed as he picked you up bridal style. “I never thought I could enjoy someone’s company so much. I don’t want to kill you at all.” he laughed almost sweetly at your weak, horrified expression. His gaze turned thoughtful. “I don't think my heart ever did love until now...you have so much potential, you just don’t know any better. Don’t fret, I’ll just have to teach you. You’ll see.”

As your eyes dropped close, he kissed your forehead.

“You’ll see.”
“Big sister...why don’t you want to marry me...?” Nikolai sighed sadly; he curled up against a tree, not taking any pleasure in the warm breeze or the clear sky above him. What was the point of witnessing such beautiful scenery when he was heartbroken?

“Um, excuse me?”

Nikolai looked up slowly; you stood above him, looking down at him curiously.

“Oh, hello.” he looked away disinterestedly. “Please go away, you’re bothering me.”

“Hey, there’s no need to be so rude.” You huffed.

Nikolai curled up tighter, his expression surly. “Just leave me alone dammit.”

“Alright, I was just going to ask if you were okay.” You turned away, grumbling lowly. “Geez, what a jerk...”

“Wait.”

You turned back in surprise at the small voice; Nikolai still didn’t meet your gaze, but he didn’t look as stoic as before. In fact, he was looking a bit sad; you wondered if maybe he was lost in the forest.

“I didn’t mean to bother you, really.” You said more kindly, sitting down next to him. “You just looked a bit out of it. Do you need help?”

Nikolai was silent for a few moments; you waited patiently.

“Tell me...” he began. “What do you do when you love someone, but they don’t love you back?”

“Oh, unrequited love troubles, huh?” You thought sympathetically. “Poor guy. He’s so handsome too.”

You leaned back against the tree, trying to think of a good answer.

“I’m not sure.” You admitted. “I guess you could keep trying to win them over, but if they really don’t feel the same, than you shouldn’t give up on love. Who knows, you might meet someone who returns your feelings and when you do, any pain you felt before won’t seem as big a deal. If someone really cares about you, they’ll let you know.”

“How?”

“How?” You echoed thoughtfully. “Well...they want to be around you. They want to share things with you, and they notice stuff about you that others might not. They pay attention to you and worry about you. There’s a lot of ways you can show you care.”

“I see.” Nikolai nodded. “You aren’t as annoying as I first suspected.”

“Thanks...”

“I don’t want to give up. I will keep trying.” his eyes were lit with a determined fire.

You smiled self deprecatingly. “Worst case scenario, binge on junk food and wine for while.”
Nikolai couldn’t help crack a smile.

Over the next few weeks, you and Nikolai were on pretty good terms; it had gotten to the point where not a day went by without him seeing you. At first, he just came to you for advice, but he soon found he enjoyed your company; everyday he found himself opening up a little more to you, everyday he found something else about you that made him smile. The two of you became friends.

“She’s the closest thing I’ve ever had to a friend.” Nikolai was lost in his thoughts as you chattered on next to him. “But…..why does that make me feel sad? Goddammit. I think… I want her to like me more.”

“Nikolai? You’re spacing out again.” You pouted. “Weren’t you listening at all?”

“Sorry.” he said quietly. “I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

Nikolai hesitated. “Do you like me?”

You blinked. “Of course I like you! Hell, if I didn’t I wouldn’t have invited you to my house, right? Is that what’s been worrying you?”

Nikolai stared at you sharply; he didn’t know you knew.

“Oh, don’t look so surprised. You may act like the strong silent type, but you’re more emotional than you let on.” You smiled cheekily.

“She noticed.” Nikolai felt his cheeks go warm as you led him inside your home; you directed him to the living room and he sat down stiffly while you got drinks.

“She shares things with me.” he thought as you cut him a slice of the cake you had bought for his visit. “She worries about me and wants me around…she must…”

“Here you go.” You said cheerfully as you handed him the cake; you sat down on the couch and Nikolai couldn’t help obsess over how close you were, how your legs were practically touching. “I hope you like the cake. It’s your favorite kind, right?”

“Y-yes.”

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Your eyes widened in concern as Nikolai’s grew glassy with emotion, his voice shook a bit with restrained emotion; he carefully set the his plate down on the low table in front of him.

“I love you too.”

You blinked. “Huh?”

“I love you too!” Nikolai smiled broadly, madly, his cheeks flushed from happiness. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it before, how silly of me! To think, it was you this whole time…”

“What? It’s just cake!” You scooted away from him quickly; he glared at you, his eyes mixed with anger and hurt. “It doesn’t mean I’m in love with you.”

“Yes it does dammit!” Nikolai insisted; he tried to move closer to you, but before he could reach out and touch you, you had smacked his hand away and ran off to your room.
“What the hell’s wrong with him? Maybe there was a reason his feelings weren’t returned.” You locked your door as you heard footsteps stomping up the stairs. “How stupid! I should’ve left the house. Oh god…”

“Darling?”

You jumped at a gentle knock on the door; you looked around quickly for anywhere to hide, but that was pointless. You couldn’t even jump from the window, you’d just break your leg going down.

“OPEN THE FUCKING DOOR!”

You shrieked as the door slammed into the wall; Nikolai was breathing harshly, his expression softening as he caught sight of you.

“Darling, why did you lock me out?” he laughed lowly as he approached your shaking form; you held back a flinch as he sat down next to you, lying his head on your shoulder with a content sigh.

“Nikolai…let me go. You’re not thinking clearly about this.” You said carefully.

“Yes I am. Like you said, sometimes you have to just keep trying if you want someone to love you.” Nikolai pulled you into a tight embrace; your hair tickled his nose and he smiled sweetly at the sensation. “I know you care about me too.”

You were too scared to move; he had broken the door down so easily, what would he do if you made him upset? “He’s crazy…”

“I’m so happy we found each other.” Nikolai breathed. “Let’s become one someday soon.”
Doflamingo Donquixote Pt. 1

At the point he and his family, excluding his dead mother, were hung on that wall a few feet above roaring flames, Doflamingo was no longer a stranger to pain. Most children his age by then were already accustomed to common bumps and scrapes, but then, those children were not the descendant of the closest thing there was to gods on earth. Even his father, until those months, never knew the sting of a rock or the burning of a flame; Celestial Dragons were not of the common people, were not humans, so it made sense they should never feel physical pain of any kind.

“That senile idiot...”

Doflamingo could feel the fire below him as well as if it was consuming his flesh; if it hurt that much from just being close, how fast would it take for him to die when it did melt his flesh off his charred bones? Who would scream the loudest, little Rosinante or their pathetic excuse for a father who gave up everything worth having and put them in this position in the first place?

“They think they can kill us...they’ll all die, every last one...we’ll see who screams next...”

But now the flames were coming closer; he could feel them on the bottoms of his feet, could feel them on his legs, his torso, his chest, his arms, and now his very eyes were melting from their sockets-

The bottle of wine perched close to his nightstand did not break as it fell from him suddenly launching his body out of bed; it rolled to the ground with a loud thunk, the leftover contents spilling over the clean carpet. He stared at it unblinkingly and reached for his glasses without changing his gaze; at this moment, you knocked on the door, just loudly enough to be heard, and stood outside with twitching hands.

“Come in.” Doflamingo watched you behind the tinted glass as you rushed over to pick up the bottle. “What is it?”

“I heard a loud noise Donquixote-sama.” You let your eyes on the bottle as you wiped it down with the cloth in your skirt pocket; you got down on your knees and began dabbing at the spill with the cloth, slowly soaking it red.

“Stop. Just get me another.”

“Yes Donquixote-sama.”

“Are you done with your morning chores?”

“Yes Donquixote-sama. I’ve run your bath and there’s a clean glass and a new bottle there.” You said as you folded the cloth and put it back in your pocket. “Is...is there anything else you need?”

“What’s with that tone?”

His sharp voice made you want to bite down on your own tongue; after you had been purchased, one of the very first rules Doflamingo had set was you were never to speak unless spoken to by him or Rosinante; the others were only commoners, so you were only allowed to speak to them without having to wait for permission. Asking him if there was anything else he needed after he had already given you clear instructions was, to him, an insult.

You got down lower on your hands and knees, bowing half way into the mess. “My apologies
Donquixote-sama, I—

“Are you implying I’m so stupid I would have forgotten other things I meant for you to do?”

“No Donquixote-sama.”

“Then why did you ask me?” The cruel smirk held no true malice; he was simply playing with you, poking you for more fearful reactions for himself to enjoy.

“You looked ill, and I thought maybe I should bring medicine.”

Doflamingo knew he must have looked a mess; his once pristine shirt was rumpled from tossing and turning, and his light hair had grown dark with sweat.

“So, you’re implying I look dreadful enough to need medicine? I’ll tell you now, I feel in perfect health.”

“My apologies, please forgive my presumption.” You bent yourself so lowly that your nose touched the stained carpet; the bittersweet scent of the alcohol flew into your nostrils and almost burned them, but you didn’t dare raise your head an inch.

“I suppose. Go and make sure my bath isn’t too hot.”

“Yes Donquixote-sama.” You rose to your feet and bowed at the waist before turning on your heel, face a bit sticky from the mess.

“And wipe yourself off. You look like a pig.”

Doflamingo smirked as you just nodded and continued to obey; in his opinion, a slave was something he should have bought years ago. When he was still a child at Mariejois, his family did have slaves for a time, slaves his father’s parents had kept for years. Once they were dead and gone, the old fool had them taken to their homes with a boat and enough money that could provide for them for the rest of their miserable lives. Not long after that, his father had begun plans for renouncing the title of Celestial Dragon, reducing them all to squalor, his mother to a frail corpse in an early grave in a matter of months, and his pride to shambles. The day he had blown a bullet through the old man’s skull was the beginning of the rest of his life, a life he was robbed of; it was only recently he had the time to attend an auction, and there you were, crying fat tears with wobbling lips, begging brokenly for someone to help while the patrons took stock of your hair and shape and resume of skills that made you fit to serve one of them.

“A bit cheap for my tastes, but at least she isn’t incompetent.” Doflamingo had enjoyed the fear the most; he decided it would be fun to have you make that face again everyday, though after a time, you had seemed to resign yourself to your new life. He laughed at the thought; after all, what else could you do?

“Donquixote-sama, your towel.”

He took it from your hands and you held back a flinch; sometimes he would just calmly take the things you brought, other times he would snatch them, and now and then, he would take them calmly and then pretend to glower and would almost strike you with whatever the object was. Today was calm, though he did still seem a bit tired; perhaps his bath and a drink would put him in a better mood.

What scared you the most was not his cruel smirks or games or taunts; it was waiting.
Your previous and first master had bought you to add to his collection; he was quite older and rumor was he was woefully impotent. The women in his possession were merely for show and of course they did the everyday tasks he could not bother with; this did not do much to assuage your fears when you were brought to his manor. The man also had a penchant for physically punishing any of the women for the slightest mistakes or sometimes for no particular reason at all. On your very first day in his service, you had spilled the hot tea you were bringing all over the front of the silky dress he had you wear. Your screams of pain from the scalding water only annoyed him further; for soiling the dress and wasting his tea, you were to be given fifty lashings. The other women didn’t even look up as he descended on you with a bullwhip; before he could finish raising his arm, the strain and fear and pain had overwhelmed you and you awoke in chains once more. A slave who fainted before he could implement his torture was boring, so he had decided to sell you back and at least break even.

It was all you could do not to fall to the floor now as you waited for Doflamingo to dismiss you; not once had his hand struck you since you began your service, but that meant little. Slaves were discarded as easily as used tissues; at the first auction, you had seen one noble shoot his slave right in the head soon after they had been purchased. Something about the eyes not being as blue as they looked on stage.

So it was the inevitable that made your eyes sting and your throat close; you sometimes wished he would just kill you already. Doflamingo had absolutely no problem with getting his hands dirty and there was no question in your mind that once the urge struck him, he would dispose of you or just make your life an even more miserable variant of hell than it already was.

“Open the bottle.”

You went to the edge of the bathtub and took the corkscrew from your pocket; the bottle of wine almost slipped from your hand as you undid the cork and placed it delicately back next to the empty glass. Doflamingo poured the drink himself and inhaled lightly; he seemed to decide the wine was worth tasting and took a sip.

“This is more bitter than my usual.”

He would often speak to himself in your presence; whether it was to trick you into speaking or to make it more clear that you were nothing more than an object among others that didn’t need to be addressed was something only he knew. You kept your eyes down, standing by the tub as he undressed and sank down into the water; you felt no embarrassment being in the same room as a naked man. You were as immobile and unfeeling as the glass or the bottle or the corkscrew; just a thing waiting to be used by him. This thought somehow made it easier to shove down your anxiety.

Once Doflamingo was almost completely submerged in the water, he leaned his head back and sighed; the coating of sweat on his skin and the tightness of his muscles were already beginning to fade. He was right where he was supposed to be and everything was in it’s place, as it should be; he took the glass and pressed the rim to his lips, taking a larger gulp this time and swallowing the rest down.

“Pour me another.”

You took the bottle, covering the bottom half with your skirt so a drop wouldn’t spill in the tub; eyes still cast to the glass alone, you made sure you were as low as you could be to the ground. To stand over him would be an insult.

“Enough.” Doflamingo gave you a second to bring the neck of the bottle up before taking his glass back to his lips; in a matter of seconds, the cup was empty. “Another.”
Doflamingo drank like a man dying of thirst; he frowned a little after every glass, as if he was trying to taste something that wasn’t there but should be. You could only see his face through the reflection shining in the glass that had been cleaned so that not a speck of dust or grime was evident.

“Another.”

You shifted on your legs that were beginning to fall asleep. “Donquixote-sama, the bottle is empty.”

He fixed you with a stare that you did not see, but felt; there really was no need for Doflamingo to ever remove the shades that obscured his eyes from view. One could always tell they were being watched by him, whether it was from the corner of his eyes or a point blank glare or a playful glint that made the person’s reflection visible in the tinted glass. It was not typically a good sign, no matter what kind of look.

“Then get another.” he said with a slow and impatient grind of his teeth; he was smiling in a way that looked more like a snarl. “The sweeter kind this time.”

You nodded and took the empty bottle away as you scurried out of the bathroom; Doflamingo waited for you to shut the door before putting a hand on his stomach. There was an uneasy feeling in the pit of his gut; perhaps it was due to not eating since the early afternoon of yesterday coupled with his heavy drinking since dusk. Perhaps it was the lack of sleep and the dully throbbing headache that had not yet begun to fade as it usually did by now.

Perhaps it was the still lingering smell of burning flesh and the phantom pain of fire and arrows and hard fists and the echoes of curses and the pathetic cries and roars for his death that still lingered.

Whatever the reason, Doflamingo felt a burning sensation travel up his throat; he practically leaped from the bath to the toilet, removing what little had been residing in his stomach to the porcelain bowl. He choked and gasped and cursed as he gripped the sides of the bowl; he was sweating once more, and his glasses slipped from his nose. Doflamingo grabbed at them only for the lenses to shatter in his iron grip; he could vaguely feel the shards pierce his palm.

“Oh my god!” You put the unopened bottle on the side of the sink before closing the door behind you and rushing to Doflamingo’s side; even in your panic, you made sure to kneel lower than him as he sat slumped and eyes oddly glazed over. Trails of vomit and spit hung at the corners of his mouth as he breathed heavily; true to his opinion of you as no more than an object, Doflamingo didn’t seem to even realize your presence as you gently wiped his mouth and even more cautiously lowered him to a slouched position against the tub.

You found the empty wine glass on the rim of the ivory tub and you filled it with cold water from the sink. Doflamingo snatched it from your hands the second you were within reach and gulped it down greedily; for a minute he was still breathing a bit harshly, his bare chest going up and down and his hands curling and uncurling.

He peered down as you bowed and held out a clean towel. “What is that for?”

“Your hand...bleeding…”

A few tears escaped your eyes; it was only now that the situation had stabilized that you realized your blunder.

“I touched him without permission...I gave him water from the tap and I spoke without permission…” You felt a tremble work it’s way down your spine as you felt him take the towel; you pressed your head to the tile and wild thoughts and memories of tales of various tortures and
punishments implemented on slaves flew through your frenzied brain. “Will he use the towel to strangle me? Will he drown me in the bathtub?”

It might have only been a minute or an hour or a moment before Doflamingo spoke; your sense of time in slavery had been severely distorted.

“Why are you crying?”

You stopped on the spot. “My apologies Donquixote-sama-”

“That doesn’t answer my question you pig.”

“I... was scared.” You didn’t dare lie; he would see right through it. Lying would just serve to make it worse for you in the long run. Without hesitation, you sank as low to the ground and kept your voice quiet; if you sounded whiny or about to cry, it might irritate him further. “My sincerest apologies.”

His eyes were still on you as he put pressure on his injured hand.

The only thing you wanted was to be at home, warm and safe and comfortable in your own bed, far away from this strange land and these strange people and this monster. Against your better sense, you sometimes wondered why you were thrust into this life. Did you do something to deserve being bound and drugged in the middle of the night and taken away to be sold like cattle? Were you not grateful enough for the life you used to lead? Did you wrong someone?

“No... there is no reason.”

The fact hit you like a brick and you felt your tense body almost drop. No reason at all. It just was and now you were going to die groveling on a bathroom floor, your skull smashed in on the clean tiles, your brains oozing from your bashed head as your owner drank another cup of wine. He would leave you for someone else to clean up.

“What a silly thing.”

You felt fingers flick the top of your head; the slight pain made you jump, but this reaction only made Doflamingo laugh.

“Get me my spare glasses, the ones in the top drawer of my bureau. And bring me a clean glass.”

You rose up slightly to see him plunk the used one down next to your head; you counted it an act of god that the glass wasn’t slammed down on your face.

“Go on now, be a good girl or I might decide against forgiving you for being so careless.”

You took the cup and walked out of the bathroom almost stiffly, but restrained from breaking out into a run. As you entered the kitchen, you saw Baby 5 sitting on the counter top, swinging her thin legs, each swing changing them into a different weapon in an odd form of exercising her powers.

“There you are!” she smiled and leaped off the counter as you put away the old glass in the sink. “Can you make me something sweet? Or is Doffy having you run errands?”

Rosinante, or Corazon, was slumped in the corner, smoke swirling and rising from his half finished cigarette; Doflamingo must have meant it as a joke that you were not allowed to speak to his brother unless spoken to first. He was mute after all, though you supposed he might have meant ‘don’t speak unless given a note to first’; Rosinante had never made verbal contact with you at any time. His gaze slid over to you for a slow second and he looked away with boredom; still, you got the impression he
tried to avoid looking at you most days. Perhaps you were as much of an eyesore as Doflamingo so liked to remind you, among other assessments.

“Hello? Did you hear me?” Baby 5 pouted a bit; she didn’t seem to be aware that you weren’t a servant. That is, you were much less.

“I…”

Baby 5 jumped as you fell to your knees in a shaking heap; even Rosinante looked mildly perturbed as you almost curled up on yourself right there in the middle of the kitchen floor. Baby 5 was attempting to get your attention and see what was the matter, but you only wept into your hands brokenly.

“I’m alive…”

Rosinante stubbed out his cigarette on his finished plate and walked out of the room; Baby 5 just looked on in confused fascination. She had not seen an adult cry like this before and the overwhelming need to be needed was mixed with a strange, uncomfortable pity as she repeatedly asked you if you needed her to do something for you. It would take another minute before you were able to calm down and return to Doflamingo, but at that moment you felt nothing else but relief.

“I’m alive…”
Doflamingo Donquixote Pt. 2 Finale

“Cora-san, what’s that on your nose?”

Buffalo and Baby 5 held in their grins as Rosinante slapped himself in the face when all he had meant to do was rub his nose clean. You kept your eyes on the dishes as he smacked them both upside the head, his ever present dull expression etched on his face while they made faces at him.

“Cora-san is so mean.” Baby 5 went to sit down beside Buffalo, who scrunched his nose theatrically as Rosinante took out a new cigarette.

“I thought smoking was bad for your lungs. Is that why you can’t talk?”

Rosinante flicked his lighter on and off, but it seemed to be out of gas; he searched his shirt pocket for a match. You wondered why someone who disliked children so much still let them hang around him; his older brother was off on business and you felt a bit more free to let your thoughts roam to almost trivial subjects. Still, you kept your sense at attention in case Rosinante ever did decide to order you to do something with a scribbled note.

“Corazon is lucky. He doesn’t have to worry about speaking out of turn or letting something slip. I can speak, but if I say something when I’m not allowed...”

You scrubbed the same dish twice as you felt yourself momentarily seized with grief that made you almost release a moan of anguish; most days you tried to take things one day at a time, yet more and more recently the fact that you would most likely end your life this way made you want to just drop everything and huddle yourself into a ball in some dark corner. Not that anyone there could care less; the other members of Doflamingo’s crew seemed to look right through you. The children didn’t seem to quite understand what you were and the meaning of it, though sometimes you found that boy with the splotchy face look at you when he thought you were busy. His eyes were frankly unnervingly cold for such a young boy, but there might have been some pity in them as he watched you cower and bow and scrape the floor every time Doflamingo was in the same room. Still, he would always look away and continue with his training; you supposed he could not afford to be bothered when he had his own problems to deal with.

You heard he was going to die within one year’s time and despite the awful tragedy he endured, you also envied the fact that his days were numbered. As the months went on it seemed your suffering would only end by your own hand and you couldn’t bring yourself to go through with it or really even knew how without botching the whole thing.

“Cora-san!!!”

Your eyes flew up at the raw panic in the children’s voices; they stared on in a mix of horror and disbelief at the way Rosinante’s coat was quickly going up in flames. Without warning, you took the pan you were washing full of dirty, soapy water and dashed it right on him. The flame went out immediately and Rosinante stared at his wet cigarette that lay limply in his fingers; after a moment, his sober gaze fell right on you. The second it did, you dropped to the floor and bowed.

“My apologies! I-I’ll clean it for you, I’ll-”

Corazon of course was silent as he stood up and loomed over you; Baby 5 and Buffalo looked almost fearful as he took out a new cigarette and used a dry match in his pants pocket to light it nonchalantly while your forehead was pressed to the floor.
“He'll use it to scar me.” You felt your flesh break out in goosebumps as you heard the match strike the table and lit up. “Please accept my sincerest apologies, I was not thinking Corazon-sama!”

Your hands balled up as you tried to contain your trembling to a minimum; Rosinante crouched down in front of you, cigarette hanging loosely from his lips as he stared down.

“Will he burn my hands? My neck? Or maybe he’ll make me raise my face…”

The hairs on the back of your nape stood straight up as you felt his hand lie flat on your head; the grip of fingers yanking out your hair, the sharp pain of him dragging your face up so he could dig the burning end of his cigarette into your cheek never came. The large hand made a stiff rubbing motion once and left your hair; the next thing you heard was scribbling.

“Hey, look.” Baby 5 was tapping your shoulder gently; you raised your head just barely enough to see the paper held at your eye level.

“Thank you.”

You bent your head back down to hide your tears. “I...do you need me to clean your coat Corazon-sama?”

There was another tap, this time finger poking the back of your head; you peeked upward only slightly, the finger was gesturing for you to look up further. With a gulp you rose off the ground into a kneeling position. Corazon was giving you a somewhat pained smile and put his palm down flat on your head once more; the smoke from his cigarette stunk and blew a bit in your face, but you didn’t register it. Perhaps to some this might look more like you were being petted like an animal, but even so, it was the closest thing anyone had shown you of kindness since you were stripped of everything that made you a human.

“Set yourself on fire again?”

“Doffy-san!” Baby 5 and Buffalo cheered; Baby 5 was the first to reach him. “I can change faster now! How was the trip?”

“Fufufu. Tiring, but it’s good to be back. Corazon, you look charred.”

Rosinante looked at the side of his coat that had the feathers burnt off and gave his brother a half shrug. You stood up, almost tripping over your own feet to bow in front of the smirking Doflamingo.

“Donquixote-sama, can I get you anything?”

Doflamingo had permitted you to ask such questions some time ago, but these of course were the only kinds of questions you were allowed to ask.

“Draw me a bath and get me a glass. Put this by the tub.” he pulled out a bottle of red wine out of his coat and handed it to you. “Drop it and I’ll make sure you don’t have hands to drop things with!”

He laughed grandly as if it was one big joke; you kept your gaze downward and waited for anymore instructions.

“Oh and by they way, have you cooked anything?”

“Yes Donquixote-sama, Baby 5-san asked me to make her cake today. I hope that was alright with you.”
“Yes, yes. What kind?”

“Dark chocolate with raspberries and chocolates icing.”

Doflamingo shrugged. “It should go with the wine well enough. Bring me a slice.”

“Yes, right away.” You moved swiftly as you prepared the cake, placing it with the wine, glass, and corkscrew on a small serving tray. Doflamingo was tried of waiting for you to take him items one at a time, so he graced you with a gift. Baby 5 and Buffalo were told to go outside for training, as Doflamingo wanted quiet after his trip; Rosinante remained in the corner, smoking as silently as a mouse as his eyes followed your almost frantic movements. Doflamingo, despite his wide toothy grin, was not to be kept waiting, especially after just coming back from business.

“Corazon, bellie for your thoughts?”

Rosinante cocked his head just so at Doflamingo’s laughing sneer.

“If you want your own slave, go buy one.”

Rosinante took a long drag of his cigarette and, of course, said nothing as he gave his brother an uncomprehending look. Doflamingo frowned for just a moment, studying that look before deciding Rosinante meant nothing by it.

And then he caught himself on fire again.

“Corazon-sama!” You shrieked and looked around wildly before taking one of the towels and smacked out the flames off his body as he rolled and flailed silently on the ground; Doflamingo didn’t raise a hand to help, only waited and shook his head slowly. Once the fire was out, Corazon just bared his teeth up at you with a painful looking smile and continued to smoke. “I-I don’t know whether to be scared or just confused…”

“Move along.” Doflamingo’s voice cut through the somewhat lighthearted atmosphere and you scurried off with cart in tow to the bathroom to begin filling up the tub. He sent one last look in Rosinante’s direction and stalked off to his room.

By the time he had shed his coat, taken off his shoes, and changed out of his dirty clothes and into a robe, the bath was already filled and the wine poured. Doflamingo smirked as you bent over the tub to check the water temperature.

“Move the corkscrew.” he told you as he shed his robe and stood before you completely unabashed; you yourself wasn’t phased. You were more focused on not dropping anything and staying out of his way. You rolled the cart to the side of the tub as Doflamingo sunk down into the water; he hissed as it stung a few shallow cuts and you found your eyes flickering over once to the small lacerations. The idea that your owner was someone who could be injured was nothing short of shocking.

“It’s nothing, just an annoyance that needed to be taken care of.” Doflamingo apparently caught your momentary glance; he lightly scratched the thin, scabbed over lines. “I’m more tired than irritated now though. I haven’t slept well. Fufufufu, but you know about that, don’t you?”

The question was not meant to be answered, so you stayed silent and knelt down by the side of the tub next to the cart and waited for more instructions. It was becoming clearer the longer you were living there, if you could call it that, that Doflamingo woke up in a cold sweat, brows furrowed, and fists shaking was not an uncommon occurrence; you never commented on it again since the first time, though you wondered if the same traumatic incident that made his brother mute kept Doflamingo from a good night’s sleep.
“Are you listening?”

“Yes Donquioxte-sama.”

“Doffy-sama. It takes you too long to say my surname, I don’t want to have to wait for you to finish talking.”

Your eyes stuck insistently to the tiles, but your mind was racing; ‘Doffy’ was what his crew called him. Not slaves, slaves should never be permitted to call their masters anything other than what they’re told to say. The very idea of calling him that was enough to make your mouth glue shut.

“Yes-”

“Yes what?”

The threatening tone got you over your fears real quick. “Yes Doffy-sama.”

Doflamingo let his hand make little swirls in the water. “Okay, you can bathe me now.”

“Yes Doffy-sama.” You rolled up your sleeves and took the clean rag off the side of the sink; this had also become part of the routine. There was nothing personal involved in it; you worked the rag over his arms and chest and neck and legs as carefully as you’d polish silver, but there was no tenderness, no care. It was yet another way of demeaning you and bolstering himself. As a god among humans, he expected as much of you to cater to his every whim without question.

Today was different.

“Undress and sit there.” Doflamingo pointed to one side of the tub; you stared at where his finger led and didn’t say anything. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

As you shed your dress, folded it, and placed it on the edge of the sink, it occurred to you he could have just made you using his strings; but then, what fun would that be? You made sure not to brush against him in the large tub as you slid down onto the bottom; your arms covered your chest and you clutched the rag in one hand as Doflamingo reached for his glass and took a sip.

“Good job.” Doflamingo expected you to begin washing him, but it seemed you were paying attention when he said to just sit down. He took his fork and you resisted wincing as it hit the plate while he took a bit of the cake; he chewed it slowly before nodding his head in approval. “Could use more raspberries. See?”

You really did wince this time as a hand grabbed your cheeks and a forkful of cake was shoved into your mouth; you were able to keep from hacking the chunks into the water and instead chewed and swallowed. “Yes Doffy-sama, you’re right.”

Doflamingo pressed the teeth of the fork against your cheek. “Very true; now you wouldn’t just be agreeing with me so I won’t stab your face?”

“No Doffy-sama.” Your face was devoid of fear; it wasn’t that you weren’t afraid, but by now you had learned to reign in your facial expressions. Neutral was the best way to go.

He regarded you with his manic smile plastered wide over his face, but dropped the fork onto the floor. “Scoot up and spread your legs.”

Before you could freeze up, you felt your limbs moving on their own; once you were in the desired position, Doflamingo leaned back against you, head resting on your chest and hands folded over his
stomach. His glasses were fogged over and you found you couldn’t tear your eyes away from the spectacle; he noticed and didn’t comment, just handed you a bottle of shampoo.

“Are you just going to sit there or are you going to follow my orders?”

You snapped out of the trance and took the bottle, squirting a generous amount onto your hand; your paused just for a moment before you began rubbing his damp hair. Suds fell onto the back of his neck and you focused on keeping them from his eyes. After what felt like an eternity, Doflamingo sat up and reached for his glass, but instead of taking a sip himself, he put the rim to your lips.

“You’re too stiff and it’s making me uncomfortable. Drink. Maybe that’ll calm down your little rabbit heart; I can hear it going a mile a minute you know.”

He smirked as you took a drink and pursed your lips as you swallowed. “Never had this before have you?”

“No Doffy-sama,” you said quietly and bowed your head. “Thank you for the privilege of drinking from the same cup as you.”

Doflamingo’s teeth were bared happily. “I’m glad you understand your position.” he leaned back and made himself comfy once more and gestured for you to continue. “You should be grateful to share the same space as me, let alone the same water and air and drink. A scared little rabbit like you being able to live as you do under me is the highest honor. Massage it in, my head still hurts.”

You did so and kept silent as Doflamingo sighed contentedly and leaned further back; his hard muscles made him heavier and you hoped he wouldn’t intentionally load you down so you’d sink under the hot water. The wine did nothing to calm your nerves but you tried to relax so he wouldn’t get mad.

“Tell me little rabbit, what are you?”

“Your property.”

“And what am I?”

“My master.”

“No, wrong.” Doflamingo looked up at you and it was then you realized with some horror that your head was higher up than his, but he himself didn’t seem to care. You could have towered over him, but it wouldn’t matter; you were not the one with the upper hand.

“I’m your god.”

“Yes Doffy-sama.” This was true; he dictated everything you did, decided what you ate and drank and when you slept and when you woke up. He controlled whether you lived or died; he was the highest power and you had no choice but to adhere to it. What else was he?

“Yet, you still felt bold enough to pity me. I was pretty angry, but I thought and realized a simple minded commoner like you doesn’t know better. I have to educate you as your superior.”

“Doffy-sama, I would never, I swear-!” You were frankly flat out confused; not once could you recall ever doing such a thing, and definitely not to his face.

“Now, now, no need to get all worked up.” Doflamingo sat up and used the detachable shower nozzle to rinse his hair. You curled up and covered yourself as well as you could as he spoke under
the water. “You admitted it yourself, you were scared for me when I was having trouble that morning.”

“No.” You wanted to scream and throw his drink in his face. “No, I was scared of you, you awful, disgusting, cruel-”

“It was more silly than insulting really, fufufu. I never thought my little rabbit would become so attached so soon, but then, I’m the only thing you can count on in this world. By the way, has my brother been bothering you?” Doflamingo turned around and ran his hands over his sopping wet hair; his glasses had beads of water clinging to the edges of the frames.

“No Doffy-sama.”

“Remember, you listen to me first, understand? You obey me before anyone else. You can do that, can’t you?” he moved back over to you and took your face in his hand, fingers tight on your chin. “Look at me.”

You felt your eyes reluctantly slide up to where his might be; there were a couple of bulging veins across his brow, but his vicious smirk was still in place.

“You. Are. Mine. Not Corazon’s, not those brats, no one else’s. I bought you, I trained you, and I own you.”

“Yes Doffy-sama…”

He leaned in and wrinkled his nose. “I shouldn’t even be touching you. It’s sorta disgusting really, but then again, I can use you however I want.”

You wanted to shrink away as he ran a hand up and down your arm; he gave your cheek a pinch and settled back down suddenly against your front. “Hand me the glass and keep bathing me.”

You did so.

“It doesn’t matter. If I want you to do something or say something or feel something, it’ll be so.” Doflamingo took a long swig of his wine and sank down further into your skin as you ran the rag up and down his chest. “You remind me of my mother.”

You didn’t say anything.

“She was weak too, but it wasn’t her fault. My stupid, soft father ruined her life, ruined all our lives.” Doflamingo drawled as he took another drink. “He should have died first.”

You kept rubbing down his neck and shoulders silently; the idea of this man having a mother was unnatural. You would not have been surprised if he really was a godlike being just born out of some other world full of fire and pain; but he had a mother.

“Rub my shoulders, there’s a crick in the right one.” he said flippantly. “But pour me another before that.”

“Yes…” you took the cup with a shaky hand and almost spilled the expensive drink into the water; but before you could give him the glass, Doflamingo grabbed the bottle and began chugging it down without a word. The water was soon mixed with spots and swirls of bright red; it almost looked like blood. Doflamingo didn’t seem to notice as he drank and drank until barely a drop was left in the bottom of the bottle. You jumped in your skin as he threw the empty bottle against the wall, but he made no comment as he gently took the still filled glass in your hand.
“Doffy-sama, would you like some water?”

“No.”

You watched him unblinkingly as he stared off ahead with a fierce scowl.

“I’m done. Get dressed.”

You avoided the broken bottle as you took a towel from the rack and dried yourself before slipping your house dress back on. Doflamingo rose up and held out his arms for you to pat him dry with the other towel; when you were done, he tied on his robe and side stepped the mess and the cart that still carried the half eaten slice of cake. You crouched down on your knees and began picking up the pieces of the bottle, but you felt your arms being jerked forward on your legs raising your body to full height.

“I didn’t say to clean it.” Doflamingo said simply. “Leave it and follow me; someone else will take care of it.”

He let his strings go and you obediently trailed after him; he sat back on the bed and patted the spot next to him.

“You’re no longer just going to be my slave.” Doflamingo pulled your forward and made you lie down. “In addition, you’ll be my pet. If you’re good, I won’t kill you. If you disobey me, I will. If you ever lie, steal, betray, or attempt to run off, you’ll die. I think that should be in your scope of understanding.”

“Yes Doffy-sama. I understand.”

“Good, very good.” he chuckled and covered his body with yours; he pressed an oddly chaste kiss to the corner of your mouth. ”I’m a bit tired still, but I can make use of you later little rabbit. Just be patient.”

“Yes Doffy-sama.”

What else could you say? You kept your eyes glued to the ceiling as he used you as a pillow and began taking sips from a half opened bottle on his nightstand. He lounged like a king as you tried not to bolt from the room and take your chances with death.

“What’s the difference?” You asked tiredly. “I’m still under lock and key. If anything, now he’s just more inclined to get mad, just more things to upset him.”

A few tears slipped from the corners of your eyes as he set the bottle back on his table and turned off the light. After a quick pat on your head, Doflamingo took off his glasses and used your arm to cover his eyes to completely block out any light.

You never felt more hopeless in your life; he had never had such a good sleep.
“Trafalgar D. Law

“Bepo, why would you lie down there!!”

The huge bear of a crew mate just stared as you gathered up the berries and oranges that fell on the deck floor. You had just stepped out of the kitchen on a mission, feeling confident in what you were about to do, and then you felt your foot step on something big and furry, which caused you to leap five feet in the air and drop half the food.

“Please don’t lie down in front of a doorway.” You told him with a half smile but he was asleep just as soon as you had turned around; you supposed you couldn’t blame him, it had been a long trip on the sea, the longest any of the crew had gone without seeing land. Your primary job as chore girl was already a monotone task as it was, but now the days seemed to carry on even longer. The only member on board who didn’t seem perturbed in the least was Law, but then, his poker face was legendary.

“When I think about it, it feels like he’s been smiling less and less lately.” You sighed to yourself as you placed the fruit in a neat arrangement; presentation didn’t mean much to your captain, but you hoped he might appreciate the gesture. He was the one who insisted on not making any unnecessary stops, though you personally thought it would be good for everyone to see some dry land before you all went a bit stir crazy.

Law himself looked a bit peaky, the dark circles under his eyes a touch darker than usual, and his frown more somber the longer they were at sea. His reason was that there was someplace he wanted to go soon; you guessed it had to do with Donquixote, but kept silent on the issue. You yourself had only been accepted to the Heart Pirates on a whim a couple of years ago; you had encountered Bepo as you wandered the street without job or money or shelter; you had never seen anything like him, but he proved to be friendly. You ended up following him to the ship, much to Law’s chagrin; but you begged for a chance to get on your feet, not caring they were pirates. All you knew was that your stomach was empty and you had zero prospects where you were. It struck you that under all his severity and ruthlessness, Law was not an unkind person when he finally granted you permission to join in exchange for food. After all, they themselves didn’t care much to keep the ship that clean and having an extra hand to take care of the little things was welcomed. You knew when to step back and let them do their thing and when to shut up and go about your chores. Perhaps this helped your case; at the least, Law being one of the Warlords promised you immunity from the World Government. The rest of them were still surprised you’d want to join up even with the security; their captain was notorious in the least flattering way.

So, for the most part, you did your job and let them do theirs. It was just easier that way for everyone and the Heart Pirates were civil and proved to be quite friendly if they liked someone. You valued this and it was one more incentive to not do or say anything to get on anyone’s bad side.

“I can’t just ignore this. He looks awful, and I feel like there’s something he’s not telling us. It may not be my place to ask, but he is technically my captain and if the doctor on our ship isn’t well or comes down with a bad illness, we’re shit out of luck.” You walked forward to where Law was searching the horizon for any enemy ships; it was already getting late and it was not his duty for night watch, but this didn’t seem to matter. From what you saw, he wasn’t getting much sleep anyway.

“What’s up?” he didn’t take his eyes off the vast ocean; you almost wondered if he was seeing something you couldn’t. You may have learned how to tie up sails and secure lines, but you didn’t have the seafare intuition of your crew mates.
“Have you had anything to eat in the last eight hours?”

“No and I’m not eating the stuff you dropped on the floor.”

You blushed. “I only dropped like two berries. Besides, Bepo was napping right outside the kitchen door…”

“You shouldn’t blame your clumsiness on others.” Law might have been smirking, but his face remained straight as he glanced at you from the corner of his eye. “What’s with all the fruit?”

“Prevents scurvy. Besides, it’s good for you right.”

Law scoffed. “Maybe you should leave the health stuff to a doctor.”

“You look like shit Captain.” You held up an orange slice to his face. “And we can hear you pacing in your room at night.”

Law faced you with raised eyebrows. “You heard?”

“Well, no...but I heard them say you walk around.” You admitted; it was well known how hard of a sleeper you were. Something about the gently rocking ship just put you right out.

“As I thought. I don’t need anything to eat. Did you secure-?”

“Yes. You asked me an hour ago. And an hour before that.”

“You didn’t let me finish.” Law muttered and set his gaze back on the setting sun; it was just a sliver now. The moon was brighter, though a few long clouds came puffing along with the breeze.

“Storm coming?”

“No, those clouds are light.” Law told you. “Why aren’t you asleep anyway?”

“I couldn’t sleep with you out here shivering in the cold and hungry.”

Law shook his head as you looked at him with exaggerated sadness. “Leave the plate. I won’t promise to stuff it down. I’m not hungry.”

“Captain Law, just a little.” You really did sound worried now. “I mean it, if you’re not in the best shape, we all get a bit anxious. I hate when you get like this anyway. Aren’t doctors supposed to know better?”

“Sometimes. I don’t know everything.”

You rolled your eyes at his tone. “You know enough. I sure know I can’t compare to you in brains, but I can’t think of anyone else who can either.”

“You’re not stupid. Just sort of dumb.”

“What’s the difference?” You asked with a fake frown.

“One’s slightly more bearable.”

“Yeah, well your hat’s dumb. Look like you skinned a snow leopard and put it’s ass on your head.”

“You just look like an ass.”
This sort of teasing became more of a regular part of the everyday as you two began to butt heads; not that Law and you weren’t at each other’s throats, but his attitude was vastly different than anyone’s you had encountered. You didn’t quite know whether he disliked you or not for a time, but soon you came to see his cold, polite indifference wasn’t so odd. That was just his way, but when he got darkly moody, it became more conspicuous. It made you a bit at ease that he was still up for banter, but even so, part of you knew he was acting to make you stop nagging.

“Go to bed. You still need to work bright and early to earn your keep here.”

You stared at Law for a moment and placed the food next to him. “Alright. Take care of yourself if you don’t feel good. God knows I’m not a doctor, I won’t be much help.”

“Will do.”

The night came fast and you settled down into your bunk with a cold glass of water; you liked to have it on hand just in case, and as you took a few sips of the cool drink, you felt your stomach settle and your mind rest a little more easily.

“Law knows what he’s doing….he’s fine, I need to have faith in him.” You smiled slightly before drifting off as the ship rocked. “But he better not waste that fruit…”

The water next to your bedside did a lot to help you get a comfortable sleep; in fact, it worked for more reasons than just to refresh you. Not that you had any idea.

Law knocked once on your door, just loud enough so you would hear; he had no idea that the rest of the crew had heard him walking around at night and he was sure to be more careful. It was a bit hard to navigate through the room at first since you turned off all your lights and since it was under the first level, no moonlight could escape inside.

It was easier by now, he had long ago memorized where the bed and the table and the map and the dresser was positioned; after a few minutes his eyes would always adjust to the lack of light and he would be able to make out your face clearly enough. He did realize that even if he slammed his foot into a piece of furniture and cursed under his breath it wouldn’t matter too much; the drug he slipped into your drinks every night made you out cold within minutes.

“Not that she needs it, the lump.” Law knelt down until he was level with your face; you were breathing lightly, letting out snores and odd breaths every few minutes, but for the most part you were way too far gone to even make words form from sleepy mutters. Sometimes your face would make faint expressions and Law wished he could use his powers to pull your dreams right out of your mind; he was sure you must have thought of him at least once while you slept.

“She’s so worried…it’s good I give her a peaceful sleep, I owe it to her for making her concerned.” Law reasoned logically as he crossed his arms and leaned on the edge of the bed; every now and then he was tempted to put a little less, just a weaker dose in your water. The curiosity gnawed at the back of his mind; what would you do if you woke up to him running fingers over your hair and cheeks and lined forehead? Would you feel scared? Angry? Embarrassed? Flattered? Law shoved back the idea of you giving him a shy smile while patting one side of the bed; it was big enough for two.

But that was too risky and he liked to plan and calculate his best odds; the odds said you were not ready to willingly let him do what he had begun to do almost every night for the past year or so.

“Room.” Law said in barely a whisper; you didn’t even stir as he laid down on the left side of the bed, taking off his hat and placing it next to the half drunken glass of water. He took a deep breath
and waited for any stirrings, but you were as still as the dead. Without another moment’s hesitation, Law moved to gesture for the left side of your chest.

“Mes…”

Your heart was removed cleanly from your body; Law was positive that if you truly were to awake in that moment, you would be traumatized and forever disgusted by him. You had never actually seen him in action before; he had always made sure you were far away from any combat.

Law lay on his back, twisting the block that held your beating heart in his steady hands; it was in perfect condition. He held it up close so he could memorize it once more; if you ever needed coronary surgery, he would know your heart from the inside out.

“It’s so much smaller than I thought it’d be…” Law couldn’t help thinking this every time; someone with such a wide smile, someone so good natured and helpful despite any sort of finesse or poise should have an equally large heart. In that way, you reminded him of Corazon. A bit less silly, a fraction more balanced, but Law couldn’t remember the last time someone cared for him as much. It only made sense you should have a larger heart beating away, but he supposed that was stupid; most hearts were about the same size after all. In fact, if he took out his own and held it up to yours for comparison, he was quite sure they’d look practically identical.

“But this is her’s, not mine.”

Part of him was scared to look at it too long; the heart was a major organ that would one day assuredly stop beating. When that day came, what would he be to you? And what would he do? What was he capable of if your heart no longer pumped blood and ceased to beat in your chest? If it was someone else’s fault, he had already made up his mind to cut them to ribbons no matter who it was, but that was easy.

But it still unnerved him to think of what he would do in those circumstances; he did have the ability to give eternal youth, but if he did, he would die. His life would end and what would become of his crew without his protection? What if he failed to stop Dolflamingo’s reign of terror before then? Law knew you would rather have your time come than to live in agony over all the things he would not be able to accomplish if he died too soon.

He held the heart to his own chest; of course you would, yet it only made him that much more eager to risk it.

“Well damn….who’s the dumb ass now?” Law thought dryly as he caressed the covering; he wanted to feel it in his hand instead, warm and pulsing. He wanted it inside his own chest, so then he would never truly be separate from you. A piece of you would be with him forever.

Law sighed shortly; if he didn’t leave now, he would be tempted to fall asleep there. The fruit has actually filled him up decently enough and the warmth emanating from your body and the comforting sound of your heart beating was making him feel more fuzzy.

“Time to go.” Law returned your heart with a frown; he was already feeling antsy without his source of comfort. Before he got up, he wrapped one arm around you tightly and let go a second later; he didn’t even try to kiss you. He knew if he did that, there wasn’t much else he could stop himself from doing.

“When this shit is over, I’ll start being more honest, alright?” Law scooped up his hat, stopped at the door and gave you one last somber look; he hoped you would wait and have faith in him until then. He couldn’t shake the thought of you getting fed up with his mysterious front, but how could
he even begin to tell you it all? The things he had seen and done, would you even be able to look at
him straight afterward? Law ran a hand over his face; now was not the time to think of the what ifs.
Not yet. His mouth formed a wicked, gleeful smirk; no, now wasn't the time for doubts. He looked
forward to when all was said and done and he was sure you would be more than happy at his
confessions. Maybe he's even bring up tonight's repeated excursion; the two of you could laugh
about it for years to come.

"I'll take care of both of us until then, so don't worry."

The door shut closed and you slept on none the wiser; only the future would tell how many more
peaceful nights you would have.
Author's Note: Spoilers for Marineford Arc and a sort of AU with still depressing results.

The world had not ended, even though it felt close to that; the battle at Marineford was unlike anything you had ever seen and when it was all said and done, you were certain it was an act of a higher power or some force human minds couldn’t comprehend that had not only saved you and several Impel Down prisoners, but the life of Fire-Fist Ace who, despite his happiness at reuniting with his brother, had been staring out blankly toward the horizon as Luffy and Rayleigh made plans. They needed to go into hiding; the fact that the marines had failed to uphold not only the strength of their notorious prison but the strength of their men was a scandal.

Their only compensation was managing to take down Whitebeard as he made a stand so his surrogate son would be able to leave with his brother to freedom. Now there was only the matter of what Ace would do now that Luffy was taking steps to become more powerful; he himself had only been able to pull off the rescue with allies, persistence, and sheer dumb luck. The fact he was still alive was nothing short of a miracle, but his triumph came with a price. For his crimes, the navy would never let him rest and Luffy knew that if he wasn’t able to get stronger on his own, there would not be much of a chance of survival once he reunited with his crew on Sabaody, the one place where he was sure to be spotted and hunted down. Rayleigh had cut a deal with the Snake Princess to allow Ace, who he slyly referred to as her possible brother-in-law, to stay on the outskirts of the island. Now that he was free to use his Devil Fruit powers, he would be fine looking after himself.

“And me? What am I going to do now?” You wondered as you stared out from your place at the window sill. “I don’t have powers. I don’t have anyone to go to. I don’t think there’s anywhere else for me to even go now that I’m a fugitive.”

Truthfully, the island of Amazon Lily was a dream; it had it’s own dangers, but to someone who had narrowly escaped the hell of Level 4, it was a paradise. Your hands still had scorch marks, the nails stained with charred ash from carrying the stacks of wood meant to fuel the monstrous fire used to heat the boiling blood pit. Your body felt hollow and you were shocked your lungs had not been compromised breathing in all the smoke, yet the doctor who saw to Luffy said from what he could tell, your body had no permanent damage, unless you counted the healed slave brand on your leg.

Truthfully, you did not belong in Impel Down to begin with; you were not even a pirate. The only reason for your sentencing was due to crossing the path of a Celestial Dragon, who objected to you accidentally dirtying their robe with soot as you cooked their meal. It didn’t matter they had specifically requested for a demonstration to entertain them at dinner or that they were leaning too close to the pans and pots. The noble decided that a stay in a place of nothing but embers and fire and soot was a fitting punishment for such an insult. Yet as a parting gift, you were given their seal; even if you were to somehow be discharged from the prison, you could not ever truly be a person.

“This place is too peaceful. I hope it never gets attacked.”

You watched in vacant silence as the women around you went about their daily lives; Luffy had been more than willing to let all the prisoners leave to their homes or crews, but you had no place to return to and no means of protecting yourself. Since you were a woman, Rayleigh suggested you might as well take up residence on the island yourself; unlike Ace, you were more than welcome to live in the actual village. Every woman there offered their condolences and service should you need anything; they had more than enough room and pity for a girl who was victimized by the brutality of thoughtless men.
It was more than kind of them but despite their friendly greetings and insistence you live amongst the population, you respectfully declined and asked to live on the edge of the Kuja village; the elder Gloriosa was willing to take you in with her as long as you did chores and ran errands to earn your keep. It wouldn’t be the first time she acted as a caretaker for a former slave and she was not hard to get along with.

It worried you how the Kuja people might have seen your rejection; it was not that you disliked the them, even if you disagreed with many of their views and practices, but even if they didn’t think the way they did, you just couldn’t bring yourself to live amongst them.

Gloriosa herself only spoke to you when necessary, something you felt very grateful for. She seemed to sense you needed time to tend to your own thoughts and she never pried for the reasons you would spend most of your free time either sitting outside to face the ocean or huddled in your cot with the curtains drawn and your head covered by the thick blanket.

Perhaps it would be better for you to interact with others, to be in the center of so much activity, but it wasn’t something you could even think of doing without a sense of dread making your hands sweat and your chest tighten in anxiety.

“I need you to do something for me.” Gloriosa didn’t comment on how even though you had already cleaned every dish, you were letting the faucet run freely over your wrinkled hands.

“Yes ma’am.” you nodded and tried to smile as you shut off the water quickly.

“Could you please bring this to Ace-san?” she held out a basket loaded with fresh fruits and warm baked bread. “I would nyot be surprised of he was eating as much as you are at the moment.”

You shrugged your shoulders. “Of course ma’am. Sorry, I haven’t had much of an appetite.”

“Hmm. Well, take your time getting there and back. Have a conversation why don’t you?”

You took the basket gently. “Gloriosa-san, won’t the Kuja and Snake Princess not like you’re giving him food? I thought the deal was he would have to fend for himself.”

“If he’s anything like Luffy-san, than all he’ll be eating is meat. The animals of our island will go extinct in two years time.” Gloriosa explained with a dry tone. “In any case, I’m nyot bothered by most men; the brother of the object of my Empress’s affection can afford a little slack I suppose.”

“Alright then ma’am, I won’t take all day.” You gave her a small bow at the waist; serving this old, if somewhat strange, lady was a thousand times more desirable than to be in the service of another monster. You mustered a smile as she waved you off and you set out to the beach.

“I wonder what sort of person he is? He doesn’t seem as loud as Luffy, but if the rumors are true, he’s no pushover…”

You treaded carefully over the warm sand to avoid stray rocks and crabs as you came closer to Ace’s home away from home. He and Luffy had actually constructed the small shack of a house themselves; it was oddly heartwarming to see two such famed powerhouses acting almost childishly as they teased and spoke of the good old days and such. But that was a few weeks ago and you wondered how Ace was holding up living in an even more secluded section of the island and if he missed the company of people; you were certain he was missing his brother.

“At least I do have Gloriosa and the other Kuja to talk with if I wanted to. They just find each other and then Luffy has to leave.”
Even so, you couldn’t help feel envious. Ace had something to look forward to, some hope and source of strength that would no doubt pull him through in the aftermath of Whitebeard’s death and Luffy’s absence. From this point on, you would just have to wait and see what your future would hold and pray it would not lead you back to hell.

“Oh hello.”

You had assumed Ace might be training, out hunting or perhaps just doing something when you arrived at his hut, but when you approached, it seemed that he had just been staring at nothing in particular as he sat in front of the doorway. You recognized the pose and felt a faint sense of camaraderie.

“Good morning. Gloriosa-san asked me to bring you these and she hopes you’re eating well.”

Ace took the basket with a polite smile and he bowed briefly to you.

“*What nice manners...*”

“Thank you very much and give her my thanks as well. These look delicious.” Ace said as he looked over the contents; his smile looked strained.

“What do you usually eat here?”

“Boars mostly, sometimes I fish. And there’s fresh fruits and other edible plants to eat.”

You nodded. “Gloriosa-san was worried you’d just eat all the animals here. I heard Luffy caught a boar when he first ended up here.”

“Yeah?” A trace of a real smile came to his lips. “That sounds like Luffy. Even beaten up and lost, food is the first thing on the brain.”

“Do you think he’ll be okay training with Rayleigh-san? I mean, he seems strong, but Rayleigh-san...”

Ace nodded. “I wouldn’t worry. Luffy will probably take anything that old man can teach him with a smile.”

“So...how have you been?” You weren’t quite sure what prodded you to ask when your original intention was to keep the conversation light; it was partially out of consideration for his circumstances, but you knew it was more than that. There was this itching sort of sensation in the back of your mind whenever you thought about Ace; you had so many questions that wanted to pour out of your lips, but you held them back.

“I’ve been well. Are you enjoying the village; Luffy told me the women here are very nice once you get to know them.”

“I don’t live in the village actually.”

Ace looked down at you with some surprise. “No? You just live with Gloriosa-san out there then?”

“Yes. It’s quiet.”

Ace gave you a long stare; it seemed he had questions of his own, but was too well mannered to blurt them out. Or maybe he already knew the answers.

“I guess you must be a long way from home huh?”
You almost smiled. “Yes.”

Ace held one of the berries in his fingers, twisting it around but not looking ready to eat a thing.

“I heard you were being held in the Blazing Hell. For someone who isn’t even a pirate, I had a hard time believing you were there….but that look on your face says everything.”

You stared at him, mouth slightly agape.

“The thing about Level 6 is that they leave you alone for the most part. But on the flip side, there is no chance for survival. You’re just kept in a cell to think about your life and how death is the only thing left to look forward to. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not so much death that scares me as it’s living without reason.”

You looked at him questioningly and he continued.

“I always wondered whether...well, whether I was meant to be here. Living. The fact that Luffy and Whitebeard, and my crew mates went through so much for me,” Ace pinched the bridge of his nose between his eyes as his voice cracked. “Well, let’s say it meant the world to me.”

“You must have meant the world to them for them to do what they did.” You added as you kept your gaze averted so he could wipe his eyes. “Will you be joining your brother when he’s done training?”

“To be perfectly honest, I have no idea what’s going to happen from here.” Ace scratched his cheek; his sudden bashful demeanor made his age more apparent. To think, he was just a couple years over twenty with a bigger reputation and bounty on his head than most men twice his age. “But I don’t see the harm in taking my time. This is a nice place and it’d be foolish to leave and cause a scene now, not when Whitebeard put his life on the line to save mine. Until the law calms down, I’ll take it easy and train on my own.”

“What about the rest of Whitebeard’s crew?”

“I guess they’ll be keeping a low profile too. Everyone involved in Marineford would do best to not draw attention to themselves.” Ace stretched his back; he seemed to be a bit more at ease after talking. It all came out somewhat rushed, as though there were things he had been pondering on and wanting to tell for some time. “But what about you? As a woman, the Kuja must be pretty welcoming and I heard their village is really nice too. Have you met many people or spoken to the Snake Princess? I heard she won’t eat until she sees Luffy again…”

“Oh, they’ve all been very kind. The Empress was very gracious to let me stay here and Gloriosa-san is so patient too. I’m quite happy here, it’s so peaceful compared to that prison.”

“I thought so, but, well…” Ace watched you carefully under the brim of his hat. “You don’t seem happy at all.”

You wanted to be strong. You wanted to shrug it all off and forget the past; everyone was moving forward and you didn’t want to be stuck, not when you had been freed of that awful place. You had no right for tears to pool in your eyes or a whimper to escape your lips as you told Ace the plain, simple truth.

“I...I don’t w-want to be here.”

He watched you for a minute and then Ace sat down and patted the patch of sand next to him. “Please have a seat; eat some of this if you’d like. You look hungry.”
“I mean it. I don’t want to be here.” You repeated softly; you felt your legs sink down under you and you clutched at your arms tightly. “It can’t be real. This can’t be real. I keep feeling as though I’ll wake up in that place…”

Ace said nothing as tears began to drip down your face; it had been a long while since you were able to cry without the heat of the environment drying them up faster than they could drop.

“I can’t even imagine...it must be so painful for you to lose your captain and see your comrades hurt...I don’t have any right crying like this. I lived didn’t I? I survived, I didn’t even leave there with a scar like Luffy or someone I loved dying. But I can’t forget it...I can still smell the blood boiling and people screaming, and no one did anything-!”

“Sh, sh, just slow down a sec.” Ace said gently as he could as you clamped your mouth shut. “Just hold on a second. Don’t feel guilty for not being happy you went through hell; and yeah, you shouldn’t dwell on it, but-”

“I don’t want to! I just want to forget, but if I ever step foot off this island, who knows what will happen?” You said with a tremble in your voice. “If they catch me...I’ll kill myself before-I might as well-!”

“Don’t say that!”

You flinched at the half glare Ace sent you.

“If you kill yourself, that old woman will be bringing me food and she’ll give me a lecture on eating more fruit.”

You and Ace stared at each other for a moment; his words were almost flippant, but the look in his eyes spoke volumes. He took a few of the berries and popped them into his mouth.

“I like boar more, but if you bring me this stuff, I don’t mind finishing it all. Especially if it’ll save me from a scolding from your caretaker.”

You watched as Ace stuffed his cheeks full with the ripe berries by the handfuls

“I...I suppose she would do that.”

“I bet you ten hundred bellies. Well, if I wasn’t broke.” Ace chuckled and held out another fistful of berries. “Here, you look like you’ve been eating as much as me.”

You took them gingerly, eating them one by one; despite not eating much at all, your stomach regularly felt nauseous. When you asked Gloriosa why, she said that people could feel that way because they were hungry, not just because they wanted to throw up something bad. You had only been consuming enough to keep from starving; Ace watched as you ate a berry one at a time.

“Gloriosa-san grows pretty sweet ones.” he commented lightly. “You like ‘em?”

You were reminded of an old folk tale; three sons were to present a dish to their father, a wise old king, in a contest to prove who should be the next in line for the throne. The candidate should be just as wise and humble to serve the kingdom’s people. The eldest two sons made the most luxurious, rich meals money could buy. The third son on his turn, asked the king to cease eating three days before he tried the last dish. It turned out to be plain rice, but the king ate every grain with a flourish. Before he won the contest, the third son was asked why rice. But he simply smiled and said that to a man who hasn’t eaten in days, plain rice would seem like a feast.
“Is it the same for people who never believed they could taste food again?” You couldn’t help ask yourself. The sense of dread and worry did not leave you, but for a few minutes, it was enough to just sit in the warm sun and feel your skin not burn, but glow and the fresh berries between your teeth. It was the first time since Marineford you could feel the blood circulating in your veins.

“They’re good.”

Ace nodded and looked out to the horizon. “Best I’ve ever had.”

A watery smile came to your face as you stuffed it full.
“What are you thinking of right now?”

You kept your eyes from the small fire; Ace had crafted a sort of pit to roast fish over it without you having to stick the meat right in the flames. He cranked the small stick that rolled the spit over the smoke; it also helped to keep away the flies and mosquitoes. You never knew they disliked the smoke.

“Hey.”

“I...it always smelled like burning fat.”

Ace stoked the coals. “You mean where they kept you.”

You nodded. “When I was there, I swore I’d never eat meat again.”

“Now that sounds like hell.”

“Hm.” You almost laughed. “I can still eat it...I just hate smelling it. I hate the smell of smoke and burning things. Back there, a lot of people would die just from being too close to the fires and inhaling too much smoke. They’d have the easiest deaths. Just, poof, and they stopped breathing.”

Ace watched you from across the pit; his eyes never looked at you pityingly. Usually they were just somber and reflecting. Tonight, his eyes were shining and a small smile played on his face.

You looked up and down from the ground to him, not quite sure how to ask why he was looking that way without sounding rude. Every night he invited you to visit and eat whatever he caught that day; you would usually bring whatever grew in Gloriosa’s garden at the time. She didn’t mind you taking him the food; she was shocked when you actually ventured out into the city to purchase dried seasoned jerky and candies. Sweets weren’t as popular with your new companion, but Ace would devour the jerky in a matter of seconds. You mainly liked it because it was meat you didn’t have to cook yourself. Anyway, it was the least you could do for him lending you an ear and a place to think.

After all, you weren’t the only one who had come close to death; you were in disbelief that being held in a place that was mostly isolated and deprived the prisoner of the freedom to even move their limbs was enough alone to drive someone mad. You had no idea how you were even still in your right mind, aside from a few hangups.

“Gloriosa-san said the human mind is more resilient than we give it credit for...but if it really was, wouldn’t I be more like Ace? Wouldn’t I be able to even glance at a fire without remembering all those things?” You wondered as you picked at your fish; it did taste good, especially with the sauce you made from the berries. “Hey, Ace?”

“Mphrg?” his mouth was stuffed full; manners aside, Ace could hardly control himself when food was involved.

You smiled halfheartedly. “When you first got your powers...was it scary? I mean, to see your body just made of fire and all that...how did you even figure out how to control it?”

Ace rubbed the back of his neck with a contemplative frown. “Well, it was definitely something else. The hardest part may have been just finding someplace to cut loose and see how powerful it was; I
could hardly try them out in a busy town and a ship might catch fire without me being able to regulate it.”

“So, what’d you do?”

“I just found an open place with no people around, you know, like a big field or in the countryside. Of course, there was that forest fire…”

“Forest fire?!”

“Heh, yeah.” Ace’s smile dropped at your expression. “I put it right out though! I just fought fire with fire, literally, and doused the flames.”

“I thought that was just a metaphor.”

“No, though it is risky if you don’t know what you’re doing.” Ace replied. “Well, it didn’t take too long for me to get the hang of the Devil Fruit power. Honestly, it sort of just becomes part of you; look at Luffy, with some training, he was able to use his in no time.”

“A part of you? I guess you would get used to it after a while, but fire? I’d be scared to death of burning myself by accident.”

“Ah, there’s no need for me to be worried. You could say I’m sort of fireproof. Not that it doesn’t have its drawbacks.” Ace confessed sheepishly. “It probably sounds ridiculous, having a power that strong but still being a pirate who can’t swim or go in the ocean.”

You laughed a bit.

“I mean, fire won’t do me much good if someone decides to throw me into a lake, right?”

This time you couldn’t quite stop laughing; it started off as a scattered sort of giggle before bursting into long peels. Ace joined you, his own chuckles alone boomed over yours and echoed through the beach, but there was something so gentle about it. Everything about him seemed harmless really, you could hardly believe someone like him was a real life pirate previously on death row.

“Ace, don’t joke! That’s terrible!” You covered your grinning mouth half way and tried to be serious.

“No, it’s funny! At least it’s ironic.” Ace slapped his thigh. “Water putting out fire!”

“Oh god, don’t! I’ll get the-hic!” You covered your mouth tightly to muffle anymore laughter alone with your hiccups, but that just made Ace accidentally spit out half of the fish as he bent his head to hide his face. You gave him a weak glare and tried to hold your breath to stop the hiccups, but you weren’t really annoyed. Not when he looked so happy.

“There’s that smile I was waiting on.”

Ace rested his chin in his palm; his eyes were shining again, but his laughing had ceased into a smile. You kept holding your breath but he could see the inquiring look of your gaze.

“What are your plans later? I mean, I don’t really want to stay on this island forever, but I know I have to stay low until the government lets their guard down.”

You nodded silently to convey your understanding as you set down your half finished plate.

“Do you have anywhere at all you want to go after this is done? I’m not sure how persistent they’ll
be in finding you, especially since you’re...huh, yeah, I forgot you weren’t actually a pirate.” Ace said almost to himself.

“It just hit you?” you couldn’t help smiling a bit; it had been almost half a year after all. Then, Ace was known to fall asleep in the middle of conversations from time to time. You never thought to bring up certain things; you’d be mortified if he suddenly passed out while you were opening up.

“Actually, he’s never done that when we’re speaking, at least not about serious subjects…”

“You in there?”

Ace’s scarred hand was waving in front of your face; you jumped in your skin and almost fell back.

“Sorry, I spaced out again!” you apologized. “And here I was thinking about how he falls asleep…”

Ace sat down next to you; right next to you actually. The heat from the fire was nothing compared to him sitting so closely.

“Well, he is technically made of fire in a way…”

“Don’t do that. Let me know what you’re thinking.” Ace crossed his legs with a half smile. “Come on, don’t leave me in the dark here.”

“Sorry.” you said quietly. “I...it was a fluke you know.”

“What was?”

“...I spilled a spot of hot oil on a Celestial Dragon. They thought the best punishment would for me to get a taste of my own medicine.” you looked down to the base of the fire. “If I had stuck his hand on the grill, I might have understood, but he wasn’t even harmed. The robe was stained and that was enough to send me to hell. It was as if a real god had sentenced me...my life meant about as much to them. Of course, Impel Down is just supposed to be for criminals, but you know how it is; if a World Noble wants something done, it will be done. Besides, there’s plenty of so called criminals there that only fought and hurt other pirates and were just tossed in their for the crime of being labeled an outlaw.”

“It’s not about morality. It’s about who could serve as a threat to the World Government; they can’t allow people like me, Emporio Ivankov, Jinbei, or Whitebeard to live, not when we don’t work for them.”

“You’re absolutely right. It doesn’t matter at all. I offended a Celestial Dragon. If they didn’t do their ‘divine duty’ it would undermine everything they stand for. They’re the highest power on earth and we’re nothing. I might as well have been a worm, a smudge of dirt-”

“Stop.”

“It’s true. When it comes right down to it, I’m nothing. I survived on a whim when so many stronger, better people died in the most painful ways. And what was it all for? It’s just a show, just another way to tell the public what we really are. It doesn’t matter. I could be a pirate, a soldier, a weak, stupid girl like I am.”

“Stop it.”

“Ace, it’s all true. Maybe not for you, not someone so strong. Ace, you’re wanted. You’re something else, you really are. Even your death would have been a turning point in the age of pirates, just as
much as your living has been. There’s so many amazing people who risked their own lives to save you and to help Luffy. You two are symbols now, I’m sure of it. You’ll change the world someday, even if you don’t mean to. But me not getting burnt to a crisp was also a fluke just as much as ending up there was. Don’t you see it, it’s all true-”

You felt your teeth practically get knocked into the back of your throat; the circulation in your upper arms was being cut off by a too tight grip. For a flashing second you thought Ace was trying to thrash some sense into you, at least until you found one of the hands finding it’s way to the back of your neck and the mouth once smashed against yours slowly pulling back to just brush against your trembling lips. You felt tears sting your eyes as Ace pulled back, one hand lowered to your shoulder while the other laid limply to his side.

“I….wasn’t sure how else to make you stop.”

You blinked your eyes quickly and licked your lips briefly but didn’t say anything.

“I’m not denying there’s some truth to what you’re saying. But you’re still wrong.”

“What?”

“You’re not nothing. You don’t have to be if you don’t want to. Don’t listen to what the world says, because they’re wrong too. I’m what I am and so are you, and no one else can say otherwise. It probably was all bad luck and coincidence. By all means, it was unlikely our paths would cross, but who’s to say it’s nothing?”

“You’re sort of losing me.” you admitted; you could understand most of what he was trying to tell you, but even he seemed to be having trouble to find just the right phrases and wording.

“Us being here, ending up here together…it doesn’t have to be nothing at least. Maybe something really good could come from it. If anything good has come from this mess, a big upside is getting to see you smiling today. I don’t…um…am I making sense?”

You took in how his flush made his light freckles stand out a bit more; it was during this dumb struck moment it hit you like a ton of bricks.

All the nights he spent telling you stories, talking about his adventures, his life, his friends, almost everything under the sun. All the days he spent having you accompany him on hunting trips, searching the beaches for supplies; he never needed you there. You didn’t do much else than follow him; he didn’t even need you to lift a finger.

“Ace…I feel the same way. I’m sorry. I never really thanked you, all this time you’ve been trying to…I’m sorry.” you wiped your face with your hands, trying to make sure you didn’t get any sand in them to worsen the problem. “I just feel like I don’t have any place in this world. I used to think maybe, but now? I can’t protect myself like you can. It’s nice here and I’m grateful to the Kuja and the Empress, but when you get right down to it, I have no choice but to stay. I don’t have anywhere else to go. I’ve never felt more-”

“Like you don’t belong anywhere?”

You sniffed and felt his hand tighten on your arm. “Well, yes at the risk of sounding like a crybaby…”

“Hey, did I say you were?”

“No.”
Ace shook his head with a smile. “I know exactly how you feel. It’s why I wanted to ask you if maybe when this all blows over, you’d want to come with me.”

“With you?!”

“Uh, yeah. If you don’t mind me asking. It’d be dangerous sure, but you’d have the strongest protecting you. Hell, we could teach you a thing or two. Nothing’s guaranteed, but I would never let you end up in a place like that.”

“Why?”

“What?”

The hard lump lodged in your throat made it hard to speak, but you were somehow able to hold back your tears. “Why? I never did anything for you. You don’t even know me. It’s going to be hard enough to go back out there with the navy on your tail, you don’t need another burden-!”

“Do I have to make you shut up again myself?”

You zipped your lip, holding back a cheeky remark as he smoothed down your hair. The fire had already made your face get ruddy and hot from the flames, so you hoped he wouldn’t be able to see the visible mark of your embarrassment.

“Look, I want to get something through your thick head right now and don’t make me repeat it.” Ace said sternly. “I would never abandon someone I call a friend, not for anything. The journey ahead is going to be that much more exciting if you’re there and I’m going to feel better knowing you’re where I can keep an eye on you.”

“Well now you’re just treating me like a little girl.”

“No, I’m treating you like someone I want to look over.” Ace insisted with a broad smile not too unlike Luffy’s; you were genuinely still surprised they weren’t blood related, not with such confident and loyal dispositions. Even now, you believed every word Ace spoke. It was as if because he said so, you wouldn’t come to any harm, as if the very idea was a crime in itself.

“So, what do say? Want to join my crew?”

You tentatively reached for his hand, but instead of a firm shake, he just held it carefully, his warm fingers drawing you in closer and closer.

“Yes…”

And with that, you added fuel to the fire.
You stood to the wayside as Ace greeted his old comrades, feeling like it would be intruding on something personal if you got too close. In truth, you were already pretty certain who was who without any introductions. Ace had told you about them all in such great details; if you asked for clarification or even that he could remind which name belonged to whom, he would beam and explain and branch off into more stories that branched into other stories.

“They have such a long history...maybe they’ll resent me being here. I don’t have any powers or skills, I can’t really fight—maybe this was a big mistake, I should just wait at the island and let Ace do his thing and—!”

“Hey, what are you doing just standing there for?! Come over here!”

You gave Ace a strained but wide smile. “Sorry. Hello—”

“Are you one of the Kuja?”

Before you could reply, Ace did so for you. “Marco, she’s one of the prisoners Luffy helped set free. She didn’t have anywhere else to go, so she took refuge with me on the island.”

“Really? I’m still shocked they let you stay there.” Marco took your hand and shook it with a kind smile. “Well, it’s nice to meet a friend of a friend.”

“Which level did they keep you miss?” Vista tipped his hat to you; you recognized him by the swords. “You don’t seem like you’d be dangerous enough to keep locked up in that kind of place.”

“I—well, I’m not actually a pirate you see.” you attempted to explain.

“Vista, we can talk about all that later.” Ace clapped the swordsman on the back. “For now I want to see who’s all here. Where’s Jozu? I see a few familiar faces, but I’m surprised that he’s not here to look disapprovingly over us.”

Marco chuckled. “He’s seeing to our course and loading the supplies. We’ll promised the Snake Princess we would only stay long enough to rest briefly and load up. How’s it been having to stay put on the beach for so long? It sounds boring with no one around.”

“You kidding me? I had plenty of company.” Ace slung an arm around your shoulders and ruffled your carefully brushed hair.

“Ace!”

“I’m sure the Kuja allowed you in their village. I’ve heard their strength is legendary, but of course, the whole island was supposed to be a myth.” Vista rubbed his chin as he looked over the shoreline.

“I sense a few have come to see us off.”

“Um, not exactly. They’re sort of...hiding, to just make sure we don’t overstay our welcome.” you confessed; sure enough, your eyes could just make out a few odd shapes and silhouettes in the
shadows and treetops. “It’s too bad I never had a chance to train with them, but I could never quite see eye to eye with anyone other than Gloriosa-san.”

The elderly woman had decided to stay back and said her goodbyes already; she seemed happy that you were venturing out yourself on the seas. While you would always be grateful to the Kuja and Boa Hancock for giving you refuge from the marines, you oddly found yourself much more welcome amongst the remaining members of the Whitebeard Pirates. In fact, as the weeks went on, you grew increasingly puzzled.

Not that they entirely went against what you would expect from pirates; they were strong, uncouth in several ways, ruthless and unconventional, yet they were not mean spirited or cruel by nature. Marco for one was a perfect gentleman and from what you could tell might have been the oldest amongst the commanders. He was especially kind in his conduct toward you. When you met Jozu, you found him intimidating, but his steadfast and serious nature was also comforting; a strong presence like his seemed to put everyone at ease.

Then there was Vista, who from what Ace had told you was rumored to be able to match Dracule Mihawk in terms of skill and strength, at least as much as many swordsmen only wished to be. It was he who took it upon himself to teach you the art, or at least some of the basics. It wasn’t quite what you were expecting to learn, but you supposed helping with maintenance duty and cooking would only take you so far. If the time ever came, you knew you would have to at least know something to defend yourself, even if Ace swore up and down your lessons were not necessary. He wouldn’t let anyone harm you.

“That is the weakest swing I’ve had the misfortune to behold.”

You kept silent, pursing your lips and concentrating harder; you were dueling with one of the less powerful crewmates who worked below deck. He was by no means a professional, but he, unlike you, already mastered the basic skills. His arms didn’t seem to be turning to jelly in less than ten minutes of sparring.

“You’re stance is unbalanced.”

Vista really didn’t need to point it out; at the moment your feet were kicked out from under you in one swift motion and your opponent’s sword was pointed right at your exposed neck.

“See?”

“Yes.” you smiled gratefully as you were helped up; your sparring partner just looked tired at this point and had barely said a word. But maybe it was because Vista’s running commentary and criticisms kept him from putting in his own two cents.

“And your wrists need to be more flexible; work to your strengths instead of trying to overpower the opponent with more forceful strikes. Maneuver yourself in a way that uses deception of your next swing.”

You blinked and dusted yourself off. “But I thought my swings were too weak…”

“Well, yes, which you still need to work on.” Vista said simply. “To properly wield your weapon, it hardly proves effective to struggle holding it up. That being said, you should also focus on adapting and making the most of what you already have to work with.”

“I think I see what you mean. It’s hard to concentrate on it all at once though.”

Vista fixed you with a sharp stare. “When a man wants to do you harm, he won’t wait until you’re
ready. If rival pirates were to come waging a attack on us, you could just run off and hide, but let’s say you were caught off guard and there was no one to defend you?”

You nodded solemnly. “I would just have to make due.”

“Exactly. Which is why when you spar, you would be wise to take advantage of your environment as well. Most women are naturally more agile, springy, quick. Most men in battle will focus on raw power and brute strength; that is your ace in the hole. You will practice dodges, ducking, being light on your feet. You can’t expect to build the proper muscles mass in the span of a week, so until then,”

Ace strolled up on the deck with an easy smile. “Vista, don’t be such a taskmaster. Honestly, she hardly needs to prepare.”

“Oh and why is that?”

“Because I’m here and her safety is my top priority.”

“And if you’re engaged in battle already? What if she’s not where you can get to her quickly enough.”

“I’ll be there. I won’t let her out of my sight.”

“Now hold on a second lover boy.” Marco had been observing the spar with no comment, but now his placid expression was wavering. “Ace, if one of your crewmates need backup, if you’re needed somewhere else during a fight, are you just going to drop everything to run to her rescue?”

You watched nervously as Ace sent Marco a deep frown; you held your sword in both your hands, grip tensing up on the handle.

“What are you trying to say Marco? I brought her aboard and she’s my responsibility. Doesn’t it only make sense I look after her well being and make sure she stays out of trouble?”

Marco sighed lightly; he saw you were growing increasingly more uncomfortable as you stood to the sideline. “Lesson’s over for today Vista. Ace, check the maps, make sure Jozu knows that light rain and heavy winds will be coming by dusk.”

“Sure thing captain.” Ace said none too flippantly; he sent you a wink and a playful smile before walking off. You sent him back a weak one in return, waiting until he was out of earshot to approach Marco.

“Captain, I’m sure Ace didn’t mean...I swear, I’ll work hard and stay out of the way.”

“No need to sound so apologetic. It’s not your fault he’s being so difficult.” Marco ran a hand through his cropped hair. “He’s been acting off since the day we picked you two up. Ace can be a hothead and as stubborn as his little brother, but he’s just—I don’t know, maybe being captain has made me a stiff.”

You smiled empathetically as Marco laughed, but you could tell he was serious; in fact, you agreed with him wholeheartedly. As kind and easy going as Ace had been on the island, it seemed he was becoming more defensive on certain subjects and was quicker to frustration and anger, especially if you were put on the spot. At first you chalked it up to being a bit overprotective, what with you being submerged in a strange and danger fraught new environment. Not to mention you often joined him at the end of the day in your shared quarters sore, exhausted, and worse for wear from the lessons. It seemed like Ace was just trying to make things easier for you what with all the sudden changes and tiring new routine.
"I’m sure it’s not easy for him either...after losing Whitebeard and almost losing Luffy...I should try to be understanding. God knows he’s spent the past two years doing more than enough to put me at ease, it’s the least I could do to not make him worry over me."

You took up your sword and smiled as it’s blade shined in the fading sunlight; it would be hard to continue the lesson in the rain, especially with what it did to the resident Devil Fruit users on board. Not that it completely drained them, but any sort of water seemed to make Ace and Marco and Juzo a tad bit more sluggish and weak compared to their typical amounts of strength.

“I’ll try to be strong too, for Ace’s sake as well as mine. I won’t just sit back and let him do everything.”

This sword would be your weapon and your shield, to serve you and the man you cared for more than anyone else. Perhaps it was too soon to have a dream of your own just yet, but if it never came to you, why not help someone you loved achieve there’s?

“I wonder...what does Ace want? I know when Whitebeard was alive, he wanted to see him become the Pirate King...but now he’s gone.”

You felt a pang of sorrow and brushed it off; Ace would not want you to dwell on it. For now, you would just do your part and be there for him. You only wished you could have shaken off your adverse feelings toward fire; even now, you couldn’t quite look at it for too long. The preferred option would be to walk in pitch darkness than have to carry a lantern or a candle, but that was just stupid. You couldn’t see in the dark after all.

“Captain Marco, I think I’ll try to speak with Ace. He might just be over worrying himself, what with me just learning this stuff. I have a lot of improvement ahead, but with Vista teaching me, I have no excuse for not getting better.” you sheathed your sword with a small half smile. “Good luck with that.”

You wanted to ask what he meant; the phrase was innocent enough, but it sounded foreboding, you wondered if Marco knew something he wasn’t letting on. Still, you felt barely any concerns as you slowly opened the door to the room you shared; the others thought that it made sense for you to have a separate area to sleep, being the only woman on the ship. The fact that Ace stayed there too was never spoken of or commented on. It just was.

As you wiped the hilt of your sword and made sure there weren’t any chinks in the blade, you waited patiently for the familiar shuffle of Ace’s footsteps. Sure enough, it only took about fifteen minutes until they were heard and Ace came inside the room, door swinging closed as he shot you a bright smile.

“Hey, there’s my swordfighter.” Ace collapsed on the bed; the rain was just beginning, you could hear it hitting lightly against the roof of the room. “I don’t know about you, but this day’s been going on too long. It feel like it’s been forever since we’ve had any time alone.”

“What do you mean?” you laughed and settled down next to him after putting away your sword. “We spend a time alone every day.”

“Yeah, but it’s not like how it was on the island.” Ace wrapped an arm around your waist and buried his nose in your neck. “Huh, you smell different today.”

“That’s probably the sweat.” you confessed sheepishly. “But anyway, this is still better than being stuck on the island with only me to talk to half the day, right? And we can meet up with Luffy and
his crew at some point once we get past the Red Line.”

“Don’t you kind of miss it though? Just the two of us...I don’t know, I feel like…”

You looked down at Ace, but his face was hidden in the crook of your neck. “Like what?”

“Like you’re changing.”

“Me?”

Ace’s hair splayed over your skin as he shifted in the bed. “Why do you want to learn swordplay suddenly?”

“Well, Vista sort of insisted and I couldn’t say no...at first. But now I thought maybe it’d be useful to know. Captain is right...you can’t always protect me. You might not always be right by my side.”

“What?” Ace’s eyes shot up to yours and the bed let out a loud creak from the sudden movement. “There’s no way. It’s bad enough I can hardly get any time with you as it is, but at the least I should be the one to watch over you.”

“But Ace, I have to be able to do something for myself. You’ve already done so much anyway.” you reasoned. “I still have a lot of growing up to do here. This isn’t like being on the island. I was so scared then, so unsure and worried about the future. You made me realize I didn’t have to be. I want to control what happens to me from now on, even if I can’t completely forget the past.”

You ran a hand through his dark locks tenderly. “I need to be able to stand on my own two feet someday.”

Ace stared at you with blank eyes as he took your hand from his hair. “Who put that in your head? Was it Marco? I already told him he needs to stop bothering me about-”

“What? No, he hasn’t said a word to me concerning this.” you looked at him strangely. “Don’t you agree with me? Don’t you think I should be more independent?”

Ace lowered himself back down and held you closer; this action wasn’t odd in the least, but his deathly quiet silence was. it wasn't often Ace was troubled. That being said, it was almost too obvious when he was. The problem was, you had no idea where this was coming from and why it was currently being directed at you.

“Ace?”

“...if that’s really what you want.”

“Ace? Would you look at me for a sec?”

He did so and though he still looked off, there was the familiar shine in his eyes when he locked them onto yours. “I am proud you know. I…”

“It’s okay. It’s all so new, at least to me. But it’s like you said before, there’s a place out there for me to belong. But before I can’t rely on other people to find it. The only thing I can do is enjoy the journey with you.”

Ace nodded and rested his head back down. “For now, let’s just sleep for a bit. I don’t want you overdoing it.”

“Of course.” you smiled and kissed the top of his head before covering the two of you with a thin
sheet. Every day was something new and every day you found yourself smiling a little more.

And yet, every day Ace seemed to smile a little less.

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